

Of the River and the Sea

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They called her lazy, apathetic, and amoral. They also said she was, by turns, too smart and too dumb. She liked to think she was funny. None of them were wrong. OC/Self Insert

Status: complete

Published: 2015-01-25

Updated: 2016-06-06

Words: 611984

Chapters: 104

Rated: Fiction M - Language: English - Genre: Adventure - Characters: Naruto U., Zabuza M., Kisame H., OC - Reviews: 9,648 - Favs: 8,687 - Follows: 6,590

Original source: <https://www.fanfiction.net/s/10996503/1/Of-the-River-and-the-Sea>

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In Which There is A Rabbit Hole
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In Which There is a Culmination of Sorts
In Which We Move Forward
In Which Separate Paths Begin to Merge
In Which We Discover Sects
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In Which Walls Fall and so Do Eras
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Meeting The End of Yourself

I do not own Naruto. It occurred to me that this fic started out with humorous intent and grew, so, trigger warnings for dark themes. I mean it. Gore, violence, war, mental health issues that are both acknowledged and ignored, unhealthy friendships, childhood abuse, neglect, emotional, mental and physical abuse, sexual assault, and general fucked up stuff.

I will also admit 100% that the first few chapters can be... rough. Very rough. I have been informed that you can jump ahead and try and guess your way around if you like that though. One day I may clean them up, but who knows? There will also be editing mistakes littered through out this fic. Those are my bad. Whoops, I suck at grammar.

The thing about death, about really dying, she would say, is that it is nigh on impossible to describe. It's intense, beyond comprehension, insanely personal and yet at the same time infinitely beyond a single experience.

Now, it could have been a simple cop out on her part. Maybe she didn't want to talk about it. Maybe it was a dark part of her existence she wanted to forget about. Maybe it frightened her to this day. Maybe the phantom sensation of leaving the physical realm haunted her dreams. Maybe the actual, tangible pain that squeezed her lungs and the ache she felt when she remembered she had left everything behind deterred her. Maybe it was the bowel-loosening sensation of fright, and maybe it was the hungry desperation for a family she could not reach that held her tongue. Perhaps it was the spiraling existential crisis it sent her into each time she thought too hard about the subject, or the lingering mental instability that would hang over her when it was spoken of. Or maybe it was the fact that describing death to the living was impossible.

With all of that in mind, it didn't stop her from trying to talk about it. She really did love to talk.

(Not so much about this, though. She would only really get into it if she trusted her conversation partner. She would also have to be thoroughly fucking wrecked for such a talk to take place. Like, painfully, horribly drunk. If she was going to spill something awkward, it was going to be awkward for everyone around, not just her.)

She wouldn't tell you how she died exactly.

It was an overdose. Accidental, the clicker on her drip was broken and she pressed the button, like, six too many times. Multiple Staph infections and broken ribs hurt. Morphine made that hurt turn into detachment and warmth.

Or where.

On a shitty hospital bed with a really itchy blanket that kept absolutely none of the cold out and a plastic wrapped pillow that crinkled each time she so much as breathed on it tucked under her head.

What she would tell you was that death was probably different for everyone. Some would most likely get pearly gates, others a lake of fire. Some would get a river whose banks teemed with lost souls, or a slate world covered in mist, or a feasting hall, or their ancestors' awaiting arms. There was probably a shit ton of deaths, she would theorize, but all she could tell you about was her own.

She would tell you that it wasn't what she expected, and then give a laugh that would have an edge to it. It wasn't instant death and then rebirth. There was a place that came after, but not really a place, because it was nothing.

It was a void, and she guessed she had become part of that nothing for a while. She didn't really know, because part of being nothing is not thinking. It's also having no sense of self, or time. Could she

have even existed if she had no concept of herself existing? Shit, she was always horrible with philosophy.

Anyway, she was part of the empty chasm, and the chasm was part of her.

(It never really left.)

It pulled and pulled at her, but never really pulled hard. The endless void accepted that struggles would come, and it had an eternity to wait. It is forever blessed with patience, waiting for her to surrender whatever it was it needed. She struggled against it, against the vastness of it all, because it was too much for any single entity to understand. She was a single bodiless existence in all of space and time, submersed in an incomprehensible mess of absolute nothing. Tendrils of nothing slipped into her miasma of self, and they didn't hurt, and they didn't feel good. They were just kind of there, but then again not. She would say that the closest thing she could ever compare the Void to was an idea, because it existed, but it had no form and no inherent power. Yet at the same time it was the most powerful thing she could imagine, the most imposing presence ever, despite never having anything to give it presence.

So she clung onto... whatever, and curled tighter and tighter into her own self-but-not-self, and eventually she compressed tightly enough that she, in fact, became herself again. There she lay, a tight curl of something inside a great expanse of nothing, and that was a god damned feat of fucking magic.

For a while still she floated, something in the nothing, before she understood suddenly that she was leaving to go. She understood that the Void could not be with something inside of it, for such a thing was a paradox. In her soul she knew she would be back again sometime, some place, someday, and maybe then she might be ready to let go. That the Void would not accept her until she was ready to go, that until she could let go all of what she was, she would be barred from here. She was thankful, because being her-but-not-her had been okay, but also fucking terrible and weird. There was a

sort of peace in it, a tranquility, she supposed. She knew that the nothing would wait until she could let go of all that made her, and she accepted that too. At peace with the choices that were made, she did not fight the Void when it began to push her away.

That is, she accepted right before the nothingness violently spat her out and she was free-falling through a straight up terrible tunnel of *fuck-that-shit* .

She was wrong, like, super fucking wrong. Oh God, she had pissed off the Void and now it was sending her to hell. She regretted so hard, like, why could she just give up everything that made her? Was it really so hard to let your entire existence be wiped away? It was just being cleaned from the state of the entire universe, it wasn't that hard, she could have done it! Honest!

Then she slammed essence first into a riot of physical sensation, and it was awful, just awful. She could see for the first time in what felt like forever, and everything was blurry. The light seared into her eyes with the force of a million angry bees, and it was all skin toned giants and dancing shadows. It was colors and colors and so many fucking colors.

If seeing was bad, hearing was infinitely worse. The noise was deafening. What sounded like a really bad opera blared around her, sung in the voices of three or four different women. One of whom was screaming. It made her head hurt and it terrified her.

It smelled like blood, human feces, and maybe a little vomit.

Her body felt something akin to jello, like really really hungry jello. Her limbs felt like a more solid manifestation of rippling water. Which was horrifying, by the way. It was sorta like the universe was saying "Welcome back to existence, remember how terrible this shit was?"

She was exchanged from one pair of titan hands to another, and there was a cooing sound, and then it clicked.

She had just been reborn.

She was a baby.

High on physical sensation and dawning horror, she laughed so hard she cried.

On a balmy fall night on October tenth, Watanabe Ryuishi was born in Kirigakure, The Village Hidden In the Mist, and her bewildered infant laughter filled the night air.

AN: WE GIVE THANKS TO THE GREAT BETA ENBI. Bless her for going through old chapters and correcting horrible mistakes.

Meeting your Infancy, Sorta

AN-I don't own Naruto. Also, looking for a beta.

Ryuishi was an odd baby, and a nightmare for her mother.

At eight months she seems to have slept her life away.

(She is waking up, and it is hard after being nothing for so long. Her senses are dulled, but it still seems like too much. Every sensation on her smooth skin is overwhelming. Every sight and sound seems multiplied by a thousand by her standards. If she had to compare it to anything, she would say that being alive again after spending time in the void is like dropping LSD and ecstasy right before going to your very first rave. So, she copes by sleeping a fuck ton.)

At nine months she is crawling.

(When she wasn't sleeping she was lying there, subtly flexing her muscles. Whether it was in her crib or on the floor. A twitch here, a flex there. She can't do much more than that because her whole body seems to be made of lumpy mashed potatoes masquerading as flesh. It makes her kinda angry, actually. She remembers being able to scabble up rock walls with only her hands and she can recall kicking the caps off of friend heads. Now she has trouble lifting her head. But the anger motivates her. This is her body and she will exert an astounding amount of control over it, just like always. Her mind knows how it feels, it simply needs the body to follow.)

At a year she is gibbering away, mimicking strings of syllables with her heavy infant tongue, either the first or last sounds Keiko makes.

(The tongue is a muscle too, and one that will help form her greatest tools, words . That being said, this language is tricky. Not as tricky as mandarin, but still pretty tough. She finally appreciates parrots

though. Having a stiff, inflexible tongue is huge set back, no matter how much she comprehends, and the birds she once made fun of now have her grudging respect.)

At eighteen months she is walking, and running, and potty trained.

(The toilets are fucking weird here, she decides. Her nursery is super boring, and she needs to explore. She doesn't mind being doted on, or being cared for. What she does mind is the complete and utter lack of mental stimulation. So when she finally finds her way to her feet she leaves the boring ass room as fast as possible. It is then she discovers she lives in a brothel, which is strange, but she isn't here to judge.)

At two, she is sloppily painting her first characters, and speaking in full sentences.

(Only hiragana, because none of the girls know any kanji or romanji. Also, fuck calligraphy brushes, that shit is nonsense. She wanted pens, dammit, pens. Hell, chalk would be better than this painting nonsense. As for speaking... it is way easier to learn a language when you have absolutely no other option. Do or die. Practice or sound mentally impotent forever. Total immersion type shit.)

At three she can speak with surprising eloquence, but most of the time Keiko has trouble getting her to not speak like a thug. She is reading slowly, but her characters are still sloppy.

(There's too many curse words and too little time. Also, seriously, fuck those brushes. They make her so angry with their stupid wooden handles and furry bristles. She must have snapped, like, at least six in her attempts to paint those shitty words. The Okiya Mother is not happy about that, and the woman takes over her lessons herself. She is a strict, unbending woman who reminds her of Professor McGonagall from Harry Potter. Well, if McGonagall had been a Slytherin instead of a Gryffindor.)

Like she said, her daughter was weird. Watanabe Keiko knew weird, too. It was kind of hard to miss as a whore.

She did not lament the fact that she sold herself for money, oh gods no, that was stupid. Men paid money to wiggle around on top of her for a little while, and she got to live in a nice house with adequate food and access to medicine. She even got some spending money after matron and the guards to their cut. This was much better than living on the streets, especially in a shinobi village. Especially a starving, economically crushed shinobi village.

She did lament the fact that her daughter stood out so much from the other children.

Keiko had thought that she knew strange but this was a new type of weird that she was not entirely familiar with. Her beautiful girl was an anomaly to her, and to all who lived in the Okiya. Ryuishi was by turns much too smart and at the same time utterly stupid. She picked up crawling so fast she was almost a prodigy, and the walking even faster, but still her words came out slow and forcibly enunciated. And her manners! Keiko may have been a whore, but she was a polite whore at least. Ryuishi on the other hand was blunt and loud and often times communicated more like a grunting, hissing animal than a human being.

It was not an uncommon sight to see Ryuishi stretching in the small courtyard of the building they lived in, mumbling things to herself in the fog. The younger girls would often gather to watch her when she was a toddler, cooing at the cute faces she made. Keiko simply had to follow the trail of baby noises to find her daughter. The toddler also liked to languidly stretch herself out on the window seals, her dark slanted eyes observing them with a calm curiosity.

Unfortunately, it was not out of place to find her daughter carefully eyeing the customers as well, watching them with too intelligent eyes and searching their faces before approaching them. It was always after they had finished with the girls that Ryuishi would corner them, batting her eyelashes and pouting her lips, a rejuvenating cup of tea

in her hand for her carefully selected target. It was never the rude ones, her mother noticed, or the ones that would become rough with the girls. Her daughter chose the clients that were nervous or seemingly unsure, new or one time only customers, careful to stay away from those who would react badly to living evidence that couplings did not always end without consequence.

Lies would drip from the little girls mouth like nectar and the unassuming males would fall for her innocent guise. The raven haired toddler would coo nonsense at the patrons, flooding them with compliments and ego boosting words, all which seemed innocent from the mouth of a child, but laden with heavy innuendo. Keiko had been concerned that her daughter had been listening to too many of her 'onee-chans' pillow talks before she began to see the little trophies Ryuishi kept from the exchanges. Bits of ninja wire and pieces of rope, wire mesh and sharp little hooks, small candies that were never eaten and a few small coins here and there for her services as the innocent little ego stoker. What the girl was collecting the for, she was unsure. What she was sure of was that her daughter had a manipulative streak a mile wide.

And that mark! The disfigurement was usually hidden behind robes, but it was there, a seal of some sorts twisting in between her babies chubby little shoulders and twisting down her spine. The mother had taken one peek at it after the birth and headed straight for the almanacs. Days later she had come out of her room and declared it a most auspicious sign from the heavens, a sign that her baby was to lead the brothel to riches. Looking at her child's beautiful coal colored, almond shaped eyes, full black hair, and sand colored skin, Keiko knew exactly how Mother thought she would lead them to riches.

(Consequently, Ryuishi learned some things that day. Turns out tattoos really are forever. Like, forever, all your lives and afterlives. She also learned that whores are the most superstitious people you will ever fucking meet. The mother had a whole room dedicated to about a billion scrolls on astrology and horoscopes and omens and

shit. Mother also took all signs of her rapid progress as more signs of fortune.)

Keiko prayed that this would not be the case, and she would be able to earn her place in the Okiya for both of them until her baby could make her own way in life. Keiko held out hope, because Ryuishi was a strong child, strong and healthy. It was more than most could say under the reign of the fourth Mizukage.

Ryuishi was firmly convinced that this was the absolute craziest shit since whoever invented meth, invented meth.

In her old life, Ryuishi had been a jack of all trades, master of very few. It turned out she would need probably every single one of those skills to survive. She thanked and cursed her prior knowledge in turns. Thanked because she had been born into the Naruto world, and even living in Kirigakure was safer than any one of the Seven Kingdoms of Westeros, or any Marvel dimension, or Psycho Pass or about a million others. Thanked because she knew what to expect, and most of her some of her skills would serve her very well in this new plane of existence.

She cursed it because it was not her world, with her family. Who would lead them now? Who would make sure mom and dad weren't at each others throats? Who would keep her house clean? Would her friends be able to afford it without her income? Who would watch her little sister (*herbabyherbabyherbaby-*), talk with her, make her smile, make sure she was okay? Who would run her out to fast food joints at three AM and make sure her hair always looked her best? How was she, was she alright? What if she was sick, or pushing herself too hard in sports? (***herbabyherbabyherbaby-***). She cursed because she was now in a world ruled by martial law at the best of times, and chaos under the worse.

(The epiphany about her current universe had been fairly simple actually. When she had hit eighteen months she had woken up with the sickening feeling of pressure right under her skin. It had felt like

her whole body wanted to throw up through her pores. Crying and afraid, she had went to the nearest woman, who had been the Matron, who had snickered at the sniveling child and informed her that the feeling was not a sign that she was going to become deathly ill, but was simply her chakra making itself known.

Which meant that somewhere, somehow, something had decided to give Cat Frank, now known as Watanabe Ryuishi, power.

Which was really dumb of them .)

Anyway...

Her survival skills from her doomsday father would probably serve her very, very well. She could fish, forage, hunt and trap with the best of them assuming that not to many of the natural fauna differentiated from her past. She could point out animal paths and edible greens and tubers already from her window.

She also point out starving children in the streets. This would need to be rectified.

Her social skills were nonexistent. Honestly, she had dutifully learned the etiquette of her new world and then immediately tossed it out. Cat Frank had been rude, blunt, often times too passionate and much too duplicitous for her own good, and Ryuishi would probably be the same. Change took effort, something she could not seem to give. Changing, she figured, sounded exhausting. Besides, she had spent years fostering that personality and she refused to throw the result of previous efforts out. So, she may not know how to interact with people or make meaningful connections, but damn if she didn't know how to twist words and manipulate situations to her own benefit.

Physical skills were also a benefit, because for some reason she had maintained her body, just not her age. (*Fuck if she knew how, because the statistics behind that were probably so astronomically small it was incomprehensible.*) That meant she knew just exactly

how athletic she could be. She would never be fast or long lasting, she would be ungodly flexible and unusually strong. In her old life she had taken gymnastics, and dabbled in Mui Thai, wrestling, and eskrima. Though her body may have forgotten the moves, she herself had not. That had to count for something, right?

Finally, not to toot her own horn or anything, she was clever. Not wise though, and believe her, those were two entirely different breeds of thing. Clever meant that she could make a trebuchet out of twigs and string. Without the wisdom though, she would use that same trebuchet to launch palm sized stones inside the brothel, flinging them straight through the paper screens that vivisected the place until they finally found their way through a window.

(She had never been spanked so hard in her previous life. The Okiya Mother had the worlds boniest hands, she swore to God.)

She would live because she was smart, her strength and ability to survive would help, but ultimately she knew that she had to use her brain. There would be no surviving the Academy if she was stupid, and yes she was going to the Academy, bloody graduation exam or not, because she was in this world now and she accepted that wholly and totally. It meant she had a say about what would happen now, and she could change it, plot be damned. Because frankly, amazing as the plot was, too many kids had experienced far too much. She had been a good sister to one, and she would try to do so for many more.

She would never know what it was like to hold a demon inside of her, or watch her family die, or what it was like to be a child soldier. What she did know was how it was like to live far below the poverty line, to go to bed hungry, belly aching and hollow, cramping just below her skin. She did know what it was like to be cold, alone and lost. She wasn't stupid enough to believe that she could fix everybody or even that all her extensive study in psychology could heal the wounds these people held.

Ryuishi did believe though that life was meant to be lived in the present, and that every stranger deserved whole hearted love until they showed that they didn't. She believed that there were things that she could do, that she would do, starting here and now, because everyone deserved a choice, and everyone needed a chance. Even murders and thieves and maniacs.

So she didn't have kunai, or good monetary funding, or mental stability. She would improvise. She would adapt. Most of all, she would overcome.

... Or, maybe should do nothing, because now that she thought about it, it sounded like a lot of work.

Meeting the Children of Mist

I do not own Naruto.

When Ryuishi turns four, she decides that it is time to get to work outside of the brothel. She has spent enough time dicking around in her new home. Her choice had nothing to do with the fact that Mother had caught her testing out her chakra control and trying to climb the walls. Nope, Ryuishi wasn't scared of the shrewd woman's gaze, not one bit. So she scoots out of a window in the cylinder shaped building and disappears into the mist.

Kiri is full of those. Big, ugly stone buildings shaped like soup cans. It looks like some weird planet from Star Wars, she decides as she pulls her hair up into a bun. Kind of like a dystopian nightmare version of Naboo, all old and tattered concrete and succulent climbing vines. There are chips missing from just about every wall, and cracks snake out from the stone as far as the eye can see. From those cracks, vibrant green vines creep across the ground, the walls, the roofs, everything. There's an abundance of nature that makes the city look like ruins. The occasional tree pokes out from cracked streets. They are thick barked, leafy things that rise from the ground like squat giants, tall and ugly. The overgrown shrubs catch droplets of condensation from the air and dripdripdrip them methodically to the vines below. There are rivers, natural and man made, that slither through the streets, carrying all the trash dropped into them. They run sluggishly, choked thick with garbage and human waste, the water oozing through canals like pus from an infected wound.

Ah, shit, that was some gross imagery. She regrets it. Gross, gross, why did her mind go to a place like that?

The ever present mist hangs heavy in the air, and Ryuishi is sure it isn't completely natural. Not any more. It is too heavy, too thick, and always around. It feels like a tangible force that weighs down on her,

soaking into her clothes, her skin, her bones. The liquid smoke pours from every inch of the environment and curls in the air, before settling deep in her lungs. The air is stagnant and stinks of rot and mildew, and she finds that of all the things she missed in this place, it is the wind, not the sun. Wind would clear this place out, the sun would only make the smell worse. Quietly, she revises her previous opinion. This city doesn't look like a brain child of George Lucas. It looks like the bastard offspring of Silent Hill and a public restroom. Ryuishi continues walking, eyes darting around, half expecting to see some sort of grosser version of Pyramid Head to burst out of an alley and accost her.

Well, if that's to be the case, she thinks, I better put my fucking hair up.

She finishes tying her hair up with a flourish of her dexterous fingers and take a deep breath.

Okay.

Okay.

Slanted coal eyes peek curiously through the fog, categorizing exactly where she had ended up on her escapade. The walls lack any familiar signs of deterioration, and the creek that dribbles ahead is completely foreign to her.

She's lost.

Fuck it. She'll just get started on her project in the middle of fucking nowhere on a fleeting whim, without any prior planning or proper research. She's pretty sure it will come back to bite her in the ass, but she has nothing better to do. Maybe she'll find a way back to the brothel later. Or maybe she'll die, brutally murdered by emaciated six year old orphans. Who cares? She's always up for a game of unexpected death.

It takes Ryuishi five more minutes of careful searching to locate what will be her first bunch. There are three of them, huddled in the end of an alleyway that reeks of piss and garbage. They are in some weird sort of dog pile on the ground that she supposes is best for warmth, but when she looks at it, all she can think is that it looks very wet. One is drowsing from the edge of the heap, and it is her who spots Ryuishi first. She looks about eight, and her hair is a drab almost-blond. When the streetrat sees the whore's daughter coming closer, she growls and kicks the other two awake, and soon six eyes are staring down at her. How tall can starving children get, for Christ's sake?

"We don't got no room, go 'way," the blonde growls out, clenching her hands into fists.

"I can show you how to get food," Ryuishi counters, a single brow arched at the aggressive display. Maybe that whole murdered in an alleyway idea wasn't to far off.

"We already know how tah steal, dummy." But the blond is peering a little closer, her hands loosening.

"I can show you something that's better. Something that isn't likely to end up with the shit getting kicked out of you."

Eyes narrowed and suspicious, the girl leans in closer, and suddenly she can smell the reek on her, can see the grit in the corners of her eyes and the slime on her clothes. Ryuishi is suddenly hit with the impulsive need to wrangle this child into a pool of soap and scrub her so hard her skin turns pink. She cannot stand grime.

"If ya lyin', we'll beat the snot outta ya," she hisses. But Ryuishi isn't dumb, she knew that when she chose them. She also knows that she has to pick a group that is not only small and young, but also desperate. Desperate enough to trust someone as young as herself, desperate enough to learn no matter the cost. With a jerk of her head, she convinces the group to follow her and leads them to one of the gross looking creeks to show them what she knows.

At first, they are suspicious when she pulls the wire from her little yukata, and they get even worse when she pulls out three large pieces of stiff wire mesh. Then she rolls the largest into a barrel and ties it in that shape, and she rolls the other two into funnels, pointing the tip of them inside the barrel and matching up the outer edges before tying them. The contraption is about the size of a small microwave, mostly because it is hard to fit wire mesh pieces on her tiny, tiny body. To the three, it looks like a piece of garbage, and then that thought gets a little too near the current situation because Ryuishi tells them to get the nastiest, most rotten piece of meat they can find and bring it to her.

"If this doesn't work I'll make ya eat it," The blond hisses.

"If this doesn't work I'll eat it by myself." That is a bold faced lie. If this doesn't work she's gonna get the hell outta dodge and try again with other brats at a later point in time.

When they leave, it is in a group, and she is left alone. Ryuishi can respect that. Three is big enough that you can get assistance when surviving, but small enough that the local shinobi won't have won't have thoughts about clearing them out to cut down on the 'riff raff'. Twisting a wire, she lets out a soft snort-as if most of the shinobi in this twisted little village didn't come from the same place themselves.

As she's cutting an opening, Ryuishi ponders the duplicitous nature of the Mist village and the turbulent time she was born in. The village is purging itself, committing a genocide of its bloodline users. It's crippling itself, though it doesn't know it yet. To do such a thing is a bout of horrendous stupidity, she thinks, especially in a time of war.

And oh, isn't she lucky? To be born during the eve of the Third Shinobi War? Because nobody is looking quite too hard at the genin they push through the academy, and ages are almost completely ignored. Cannon fodder is simply that, and the children they push to the front lines are never expected to make it back. If they do, it comes as a pleasant surprise, a sort of gift that the Mizukage has prevented himself from getting. Not that the Mizukage is actually

acting under his own will, of course. In all actuality, it's a very clever plot by that Uchiha jackass that effectively makes sure that Kiri never has enough power to stand against him. Or is it? She's not completely sure of the timeline yet.

She twists one final wire tight and waits a few minutes for the others to return, keeping an eye out for trouble. When they do come back, the one who had slept on the bottom of the pile thrusts something disgusting in her face. Maybe it was once... chicken? Holy shit, Ryuishi can't even tell. It's rotted and slimy, omitting an odor that reminds her of hot pepper diarrhea, and she wants to vomit her morning breakfast. A few white maggots undulate inside of it, and her stomach squirms harder in a valiant effort to make her hurl.

It's perfect.

She lets the boy place it inside the trap and lowers it into the water by a strand of rope before tying it to a nearby boulder. Then she motions to the group follow.

Follow they do, and for a few hours they sneak about, Ryuishi teaching them things along the way. From the riverside they dig up cattail roots and baby fern shoots that curl out of the soil. In shadow of a ruined apartment complex they pluck wild garlic from the ground, and snatch together bundles of vines. They collect dry, dead grass and bundles of driftwood and a long flat stone. The group learns how to dig a gypsy well and how to filter the water with gravel, sand, and charcoal. (That last bit was harder to find and she had been forced to sneak into somebody else's yard and steal from their ash pit.)

To those that see them they look like any other orphan group, lost and hungry, searching for something, anything to eat. Nobody asks, actually most of the time they pretend not to even see them. Ryuishi finds that to be a totally dick move. The shinobi sometimes peer curiously, but the group does their best to avoid them, sneaking through back alleys and twisting paths in the fog like silent little mice. They stash their things in the gang's alleyway before pulling up the

trap hours later. The group gasps behind her, and even Ryuishi is a little surprised.

Inside are dozens of eels, writhing around like a nest of particularly pissed off noodles. They gasp for air and reveal mouths filled with stubby, sharp little teeth, and the noise they make, all moving together, sounds like something out of a porno. The children behind her make noises of disgust but she shushes them and orders them to bring her the sharpest rock they can find, and to filter some water for her. Cleaning these things is gonna be a bitch. The group watches her with some morbid curiosity as she slams the heads off of their thin bodies with the sharp edge of a stone and then peels their rubbery skin off.

"Eels live in gross water and love meaty garbage," she tells them as she scoops the guts out of yet another with her pinky nail. Regret fills her because she knows the smell is going to cling to her hands and clothes like a bad ex. "Even if the water has no air, and looks like it's full of scum, they can survive. I never saw anybody fishing for them, but I saw the birds eat them," she explains.

The group is quiet as she leads them back to the alley, a stinking pile of eel flesh in her trap, washed semi clean by the water from their new 'well'. They watch as she lights a fire in the bottom of a tipped over metal barrel with the dead grass and driftwood, and then hides the beacon of light with the tattered remains of a blanket. They wonder silently when she cleans the stone of dirt and places it inside with cautious, pudgy hands. The cattail roots go inside the coals and she slices the eel, the fern, and the peeled garlic with her sharp edged stone into thick blocks, and leaves them on the sizzling hot stone. Soon, a smell begins to fill the air, the smell of smoke and food, and the group worries about others coming before the girl snorts and points out the fact that they are surrounded by apartments that will funnel the smoke up instead of out, and the smell of the filth around them is too pungent to break through.

The blond watches with a particular awe when it is finished and the girl pulls a hot pile of food from the barrel like magic. The girl passes

around the now roasted roots to be peeled of their burnt skins and eaten, and the brat passing it out looks like some sort of angel. The trio descends and devours the meal like locusts, ignoring the woody texture of the roots and the muddy taste of the eel. It is food, pulled out from places they had never acknowledged, never thought to look. It sits heavy and solid in their stomach and blond can't remember when she had last been full. It warms her, and she is sleepy, and her group is safe for another day. Better yet, she can gather more food the same way tomorrow.

She looks at the little girl in front of her, so clean and well kept, even after all the digging and cleaning and work. She's too healthy to be like them, her hair too nice and her skin too unblemished. So why would she care?

"Because you're children."

The blond is surprised, because she hadn't realized that she had spoken out loud. And also, isn't she a kid like them?

"You're kids," the girl says again, and the blond is scared because when she looks into her dark eyes, it's not like a kid's eyes. It's hollow and dark and *emptyemptyempty*, it's the look she saw in the eels' eyes when the girl cut their head off. It is dead. But this girl, this thing, it's talking and-

"You should be cared for, loved and cherished. You're not supposed to on the streets like dirty fucking animals, you deserve better for no other reason that you exist. You had no choice coming into this world, and the people that leave you like that, they're shit. You deserve to be here, you deserve a chance to live. If that means I have to teach you, hide from shinobi and run away every day, then so be it. Then you can teach other kids, and they can teach even more. Who needs the adults? By the time I'm done, there won't be any lonely kids left, because every orphan in Kiri will be family. They will be a tribe."

-and then the blond doesn't care, because nobody has ever told her that sorta stuff. Nobody ever said she should get a chance just because, nobody told her she didn't have to prove herself.

No one had ever said that she was enough.

So she ignored the empty eyes on the little girl who wasn't a little girl, and she didn't say a word. She just smiled and asked her when she could learn more.

Together, they begin to plot.

Meeting the Darker Side of the Red Light

I do not own Naruto. Trigger warnings for dark themes of a sexual nature, gore, violence, mentions of pedophilia. Maybe cannibalism?

Ryuishi leaves the alley when it is dark and the red lanterns of the akasen district are just beginning to be lit. Their red glow spreads out and blurs in the gloomy mist, painting the early evening crimson. Already she can spot men and women emerging, prowling the streets for a customer or a partner. If her previous actions with the brats hadn't been so profitable, she would regret coming out at all. She is young and passably pretty, and nights in the red light district can be very, very dangerous.

This is exactly why I need to plan ahead, she thinks to herself, keeping her eyes on the ground. *This is what comes to fruition when you don't plan out every detail, when you act so rash. You end up in the red light district, in Kiri, at night, where every fetish is fed and morals are nowhere to be found*. What if somebody tries to buy her? What if somebody doesn't even try? She might not be a blushing virgin, but this body is. What if some Matron decides she's running low on daughters and wants to restock her stables?

Where the *fuck* is her brothel?

She can't even begin to explain where she is in relation to every other building, because the district is a sprawling maze without any sense of order. It's entirely too much like London, with alleyways spreading out in every direction and streets winding back on themselves. It's probably to confuse intruders, but all it seems to do is confuse natives who haven't memorized these pathways for their entire lives. It's not like maps exist, as helpful as they would be. Apparently, that would just be begging for an organized attack. Not that a Kumo nin could even fit on half of these streets, as narrow as

they are. Maybe she should ask one of the nicer looking women? No, that's risky as hell, nobody likes an *akasen*ko .

The name makes her want to snort bitterly. Child of the red line, whore's child, harlot's brood. Like the job her mom chose was a bad one. Whoring was the world's oldest profession, and it had few masters. Keiko chose to work her way up, and the place she had now, even after having a child, was nothing short of respectable. Respectable, because Keiko chose this path and walked it willingly. But respectable or not, Ryuishi is wearing a child's body, and she has no want to become a prostitute... *ever* . Her gut is churning and she wants to vomit, wants to make a joke, but nothing right now is funny.

She'll admit it, she's scared.

Her feet move a bit faster, tearing her eyes away from the ground in a move that is equal parts bold and desperate. She needs to find the brothel before somebody tries to take her. *Nobody notice me, she prays, I am nothing, nobody. I am silent. I am the quiet of the grave. I am a single raindrop in the river.* Ryuishi prays the prayers that Cat Frank's mother once taught her in the panic of her head.

*I am nothing, I am nobody, I am the quiet of the grave. I am a raindrop in the river, and a river in the sea. Please, **please** , let those that passed and shared my blood protect and guard me* . She chants it again and again inside her head, her knuckles white as her hands grip tightly together. Her footsteps are brisk and even, her face serene and eyes pointed down at the hands clasped firmly together in front of her. Her mind is screaming.

The sound of her steps is soon drowned out by the noise of many more. The streets are beginning to fill up, and she can feel curious, appraising eyes on her. Ryuishi wants to rip those eyes out of their observing faces with her tiny fucking hands and mash them in her palms. How *dare* they! She looks just like a kid! Her body is barely out of toddlerhood!

She can scream and rage and cry all she wants, but this is Kiri. She knows that as long as it doesn't upset the power balance or further destroy the economy, anything goes. There are kids dying on the streets and civilians being murdered in their homes. Nobody cares. It's a world full of child soldiers and physics-destroying superpowers. Demons walk the motherfucking earth, and murders rise from the goddamned dead. Nobody in power cares unless it directly affects them.

She suddenly wishes she had more than ninja wire and scraps on her. She would punch a baby in the fucking face for her old tactical knife. Or pepper spray, or anything else really at this point. This isn't LA, or Chicago, and she is not a woman grown who can without fear, comfortable in the knowledge she can protect herself. She is wearing a hilariously weak body, which is horribly unsuited for combat. She suddenly wishes that she hadn't spent her time networking, and instead had focused on training up her body. Sure, it would be hard to go unnoticed, but she doubts she already has anyway. Being a full grown adult is hard to hide. She is sure that Keiko has noticed, and knows for sure that Kagami Okaa-sama has.

(Originally, she didn't really care if she stood out. Then she figured out which time period she was in, and where she was at. They were already wiping out clans, and prodigies were regarded with wary and hateful eyes. You did not stand above your cast in Kiri, lest you be cut down.)

If she lives through tonight, she is going to train her body into a weapon, so it won't matter if she is unarmed.

She spots little feet passing by hers and looks up briefly to catch the dead gaze of boy who can't be more than thirteen, walking with an older woman. Her panicked musing is shattered. His drugged gaze catches hers, and for a single second, she can read his pity, his despair.

All of her humor and bitter apathy bleeds out of her.

Rage blooms hot in her heart and she grits her jaw tight, clenching her hands so tightly together her that nubby nails bite into her skin. Ryuishi wants to draw him away, to take every child in this shitty village and clutch them tight. She wants to hold them and watch this whole fucking city burn to the ground, to rejoice in the screams of the uncaring adults and bask in the wailing of its leaders. She wishes for the power to wrap the ocean around her like a second skin and ride it here, to wash this place clean and watch the ugly, disgusting monsters be swallowed up by the unrelenting salt water and brine. She wants the wind to tear them down, and the earth to swallow them up. She wants to break things, to burn them, to burn the ashes, and to wash all that remains away into the sea.

The boy offers her a comforting smile that breaks her heart and continues to walk away, his arm clutched tight in the talon of a filthy predator of a woman. Cold loathing consumes her, and the ocean inside her soul rages, a storm of guilt and hate and sorrow.

She keeps walking. She is only four.

She hasn't even made it a full block away when a callused hand is suddenly pulling on her arm. She shouldn't have stopped, should have been more aware of her surroundings. Ryuishi wants to run, but the hand is too tight. She looks up at the nameless assaulter, sees his disgusting green eyes and unbrushed brown hair. In another time, in another place, his five o'clock shadow would have been considered roguish and handsome. His hair would have been charmingly tousled. Now, in her eyes, all she can see is a vile piece of trash. He is a pretty piece of garbage wearing a false skin, someone who looks like he isn't capable of what she knows he is.

"Now, aren't you a pretty little doll. Are you one of Mama Hui's young little flowers?" he asks in a firm voice.

His words make her hate him.

"I am not for sale," she spits out coldly. If he will not respect her, perhaps he will respect the law of the akasen.

He laughs and runs a grubby paw across her nicely coiffed hair. Ryuishi should not have hoped. Her spine stiffens and she watches as his eyes go dark, his expression suddenly predatory. Plans are running fast pace through her head, and her gut sinks into her sandals. His arm is suddenly as tight as a bulldog's mouth on her arm. Her mind freezes on a single form of escape. She has to plan, she has to act.

"Well, it's better to ask for forgiveness instead of permission, right?"

And then he is dragging her, even as she tries to squirm free. She tries to yell for help. She gets a few glances, but his placid, consolatory smile send turns them away. They think she is just nervous, or perhaps she is a runaway, or maybe that this is just an act. She hates them too. She digs her heel in, but he is so much stronger than her. Suddenly all her fears are validated.

"Mama Hui will understand. After all, I am her best customer. I just want a taste, and then I'll walk you right back, okay? Come on little daisy, it'll be alright," he coos, pulling her into an alleyway between two shadier brothels. It is dark, and the air smells like stale sweat and leftovers and booze. She hates him so much, so so much.

He pushes her onto the ground and grasps her hands in his, smiling all the while. Ryuishi tries to kick him, but her legs are small and she holds no power now. He seems delighted by it all, some sort of power trip if she had to guess. Her struggles just seem to feed his ego.

"Be still little daisy, It's all right, hush now, I've got you," he calms, caging her in.

"Let me go! I'm not for sale!" she screams out at him, "Let me go, let me go, *let me go* !"

He chuckles at her, and she stills, eyes gazing up through tear stained lashes, cheeks flushed pink from the effort. "Now little daisy, it'll be alright. It'll only hurt a little, now, lets get you warm," he

chuckles out, pressing his chest against her, his arms wrapping around her. His thick, heavy hands are kneading into her back and slide down to her waist, her thighs. His grip is like steels and he smells like grass. His hug forms a cage and traps her hands between them, smashing her arms against his chest. The position is forcing her head to lie on top of his shoulder and it presses her face into the crook of his neck. Ryuishi can feel his breath ghosting down her skin, and she knows this might be her only chance.

She opens her mouth as wide as it can go and sinks her teeth into his neck.

The table have turned and he is the one screaming now, his arms scrabbling to push her away. Ryuishi feels warm, coppery blood flood her mouth and squishes a piece of his flesh out of her mouth before biting harder, biting and shaking her head like a dog, ripping things, crushing bones between her baby teeth. The action feeds the cold rage in her heart. The stormy ocean of her soul is mollified by the carnage and the seas inside of her run red. Her snarls turn to gurgles as the liquid bubbles at the corners of her mouth and chunks slide down her chin.

His hands wrap in her hair and try to pull her free, but her jaw is clenched tight, and she is too high on panic and anger to feel the hairs he rips from her scalp. His actions free her hands, which dart up to his neck, her little fingers crawling into the edge of his wounds, squirming inside the opening like sentient hooks. His howling is weakening, but it isn't enough, won't be enough. It only ends when her hand grasps around the edges of the wound, fingers sunk into flesh, and rip the front of his neck free from the rest of his body. His hand slumps out of her hair and his body folds beneath him, his glassy eyes glued to the wall behind her. He is dead before he finishes crashing to the trash covered floor.

Ryuishi stands over the body and spits the remains of him out her mouth and into his unseeing eyes, and pants like an animal, endorphins running strong. She looks at the corpse, and screams in rage, flinging his trachea back at him. Her weak little leg, so useless

before, stomps his stupid fucking face, again and again, until the nose is pancaked and his front teeth are gone.

She shrieks at the lifeless thing again, her call cutting through the alley air like a blade, her eyes fixed on its ruined visage. Her feelings rush out with the howl, the anger and fear and despair, and she empties herself then and there, bidding him to take these things with him as he descends to hell. She will bury her these with the memory of him.

Let my screams carry you down. Let my rage be the only sound you hear in the Void that is death, she prays.

Then, breathless and tired and covered in the remains of of a lecherous pedophile, she feels better.

She is filthy, she is tired, and looking down at a corpse she has just created, she doesn't care. Her heart is cold. She doesn't regret his death one fucking bit.

(When she leaves the alleyway, she does not notice the disgusted, curious eyes following her steps.)

Nobody bothers the ragged, blood-covered child again, and eventually she finds her way back to the Okiya, guided by a helpful hooker who lived with her at the brothel. Kagami Okaa-sama sent them searching, and somewhere she feels pleased with that thought. But the Nee-chan is too late, far too late.

She is not who she was when she left, and a monster was born in that alley.

(It will be a while before she realizes she was not the only one to witness its birth.)

Meeting the Mental Breakdown

I do not own Naruto

Madam Kagami, Matron of the Kagami brothel, ex-chuunin and possibly one of the best honeypots Kiri had ever produced, had been waiting for a sign from the moment Keiko's pregnancy had failed to terminate. She was a superstitious woman, and so the moment the black root tea had been reported to fail, she had looked closer at the young whore and took notice. It was a subtle sign, but a sign none the less. The second time, she watched the woman drink the brew herself to make sure that it wasn't a ruse. It failed. Together they tried one final time, brewing the tea so strong it made Keiko sick for days afterward. Still the woman's belly grew.

(She should have read the signs better.)

So Madam Kagami allowed the child to be born, taking it as a sign from the heavens that this child was meant to be. She attended the birth herself, watching the struggling woman push and bleed and sweat to bring forth the baby which had refused to die. When it came out with one final heave and a scream, she was the one to catch it in her hands, to see it blink its dark eyes. She was the first one to see the mark on its back. A clever depiction of the yin and yang taking the form of a white fox chasing a sleek black feline inked into between the babe's shoulders. The figures were encircled by skeletal body of a great serpent, whose body curled around her tan skin, its skull resting on her spine with its fangs bare. She was the first to witness its utter abnormality.

A shiver had run down her spine at the sight, and she had fled to her rooms, searching for portents and omens among the scrolls in her office, hoping for a sign. She searched shelf after shelf, surrounded by the smell of dust and accompanied only by the passing light of the days. The scrolls only confirmed what she knew: The fox for

opportunity, the cat for wealth, and the snake for good fortune. Although the signs pointed to a great future, Kagami had been uneasy. The child was unnatural, and her gut said that it was not meant to be here.

Looking at the figure before her, she knew it to be true.

Little Ryuishi had been missing since morning, since Kagami had discovered her climbing the sleek Okiya walls in a masterful display on chakra control. They had been worried as the time began to pass. The worry had turned frantic when the sun began to set. The akasen was no place for a young child. Things would happen, unpleasant things. So when the night had truly began to darken, a chosen few were sent to find the girl, but they were not expecting to find her like this. Assaulted, abused, or violated, these were things she could deal with, things that would happen eventually in most cases. They would help the child cope, teach her how to not let it happen again, support her inside the Okiya and nurture her back. Kagami had done it for many girls before, she would probably do it for many more.

She had expected not this.

"What happened?" she asks sharply, catching the young girl's eyes.

"There was a man." The girl pauses, hesitant. "I... I told him I was not for sale. He did not listen. He is dead," Ryuishi replied back, eyes holding hers, looking for something. For what, Madam Kagami did not know.

She did know the girl was covered in blood and chunks of gore, the likes of which many in the brothel had not seen since their times on the streets. Her hair was wild and her eyes were flinty and cold. Kagami knew that look, she had been a kunoichi once, long ago. The juxtaposition of a regret-less killer's looks on the face of an infant was not one she was comfortable with, but she knew what her gut had been telling her now.

(She should have read the signs better.)

With a tired sigh, the girl's shoulder slumped and she rubbed her eyes with a dirty hand. She must have found what she was looking for. Kagami still did not know what it was.

"I didn't wanna, Okaa-sama. He wouldn't let me go and... and it just happened. I don't even feel bad, I just want a hot bath and to go to sleep." She looks back up then, black eyes begging. "Please?"

Kagami nods and sends her on her way, letting Keiko comfort her while she went back to her office to send a letter to an old acquaintance.

(She should have read the signs better.)

The girl was never meant to be an entertainer, she thought to herself, pulling a book out of the hidden bottom of her drawer. A book she hadn't used since she had been forcibly retired from the kunoichi forces.

No, she thought, opening its pages and skimming through a list of old contacts. *There is only one path for her.*

Watanabe Ryuishi wakes up one morning, and when she looks around her room, she feels like smashing everything. The grey of the concrete is too bland, too toneless. The paper screen that divides the room into halves (One for her, one for her mother) is too delicate, too foreign. The futon she is lying in scratches against her skin and is too firm for comfort. The weather outside is not the hot, humid temperature of her home. The watery sukiyaki she had last night was not her mother's lempor or her father's smoked brisket. The prostitute on the other side of the screen is not her parent.

Her world is one of savage cunning and advanced tech, not of totalitarian dictatorships and superpowered murderers. Her name isn't even Ryuishi, for Christ's sake. She doesn't belong, and she doesn't mean that like an angsty teen. She means it in the way that she is dead, like, super dead. She remembers the foggy

nothingness, the eternal Void. She remembers falling forever in the space between stars. She means that she does not belong here because she is not supposed to be alive, she is an unnatural occurrence.

She is an abomination.

(A month ago she killed a man. She ripped out his throat with her teeth. She doesn't regret it.)

She is physically five years old, and she is losing her mind. She feels it in her heart, right down to her soul.

When she shuffles silently out of her bed and stands, she stares at her tiny feet for several drawn out minutes, and something nameless and raw stirs in her gut. She cannot name it, but it feels familiar to her. Her mind is blank, but she knows the sensation well, the feel of several forces warring inside of her, churning inside her, those nameless facets of her personality.

(In another world- *her world, hers*- she hears whispers of symptoms behind closed doors. She hears them spoken in offices painted in carefully neutral earth tones filled with overstuffed chairs and saccharine smiles.)

The little girl steps forward, still staring at her impossibly small feet, shifting closer to the small chest in the corner of her room. She ignores the lip stains and kohl liners and digs around for a set of clean clothes to wear after her morning bath before a pair of onyx eyes catch hers.

She sees her reflection in one of the mirrors leaning against the wall. The wavy black hair that falls between her shoulders and the chubby, childish cheeks and she wants to laugh and laugh until she is crying, because that is not her, that is not her body. These tiny, pudgy hands are not hers, and neither is the worn robe she is claspings. The eyes are too sharp, too dark. The flesh is too soft, too unblemished. That girl in the mirror is not her.

(*Thatsnotherthatsnotherthatsnother-*)

Her breathing quickens, and this time, she is laughing. A hysterical, choking, hacking sound. She is laughing so hard tears condense in the corners of her eyes and fall down her face. There is snot flooding her nostrils and she feels uncomfortably warm. Her heart stutters painfully inside her chest and she knows, she fucking knows what is coming. She's laughing so loud it hurts her throat. She feels something in her neck stretch to the point of painful.

(A month ago she killed a man. She ripped out his throat with her teeth. She doesn't regret it. She would do it again.)

She hears Keiko on the other side of the room startling awake over her laughter. She hears her fake mother's feet on the ground and a scream for help, before she feels arms around the body that is not hers, a body that hasn't been hers for years and years and years.

What has she been thinking? Has she forgotten who she was, what she was?

She wasn't some little fucking Mist brat, some child soldier. She was a grown woman with nigh on two decades of education under her belt, at least five years of work experience and knowledge. She was a responsibility dodging, lazy, apathetic, grade-A douche. She wasn't cunning or smart. She couldn't save a fake world, she wasn't even stable enough to save herself. What kind of sick fever dream has she been loping through? Naruto is just a book, it's just a show. It's a story, just a fucking story. She's crazy, and she knows it.

She knew it back then, too. It had only taken five years for her to remember.

Five years to remember that she had a family, a loving, caring, fucked up family. That she had cousins with artistic skills that blew her away, whose cooking talent could put chefs across the globe to shame. She remembers that she has parents, real parents, not just a pseudo older sibling figure like Keiko. She had a mom with intensely

short black hair (her hair) and dark almond eyes (her eyes). A mom who liked insanely graphic medical documentaries and could arrange flowers into breathtaking works of art. A dad who was a giant of a man who could turn scrap wood into furniture that would last years, who could argue all day long, and who taught every one of his children how to survive by tooth and wit and claw. She remembers a best friend, a completion to her soul, her platonic other half. She remembers a pile of brothers, all laughing and smirking and wrestling. She remembers a baby sister.

Her laughter turns into screaming.

She screams and screams and screams, just to get it out, the awful things inside of her. The tangible heartache that rips across her chest. She screams until it sounds more like a howl, until that howl turns into the warbling screech of a demon. She screams until the stretching feeling in the back of her throat turns into a shredding one, and she can taste blood on the back of her tongue.

She can't fucking *breathe*, it hurts so bad. She has broken bones and they have hurt less. There are fat, ugly drops of salty water running down her face, and her nose is filled and dripping. There is a tearing inside of her, next to the fluttering staccato beat of her heart.

Her baby, her baby girl. Her anchor, her everything. Her little baby sister.

She cries out until she can't hear her own voice, until she can't feel the arms around the body that is not hers. She weeps and she wails until the dysphoria fills her, and the tiny, chubby hands in front of her face don't matter any more, because everything is so very far away. It's not real, not real at all.

(She's still screaming.)

She will fully admit that she kinda lost her shit at that point. It wasn't pretty, or nice, or fun, or dramatic. It was awful. The world took on an almost forgotten, dreamlike quality, and the sense of out of body,

loose floating spirit sensation smothered her senses. It felt like lying beneath the surface of a lake. She could see things, and she could hear them, but those things were distant. She could move and react, but it was more like moving a puppet than actually living.

Ryuishi was... submerged.

It hurt her so much to face the world right now, hurt her deep inside her soul, a solid ache inside the substance that was her. She didn't want to act, to be, so she swam inside herself and forced something else to take her place. She really didn't care what came up or how bad she acted at the time, she only knew that she couldn't deal with it right now. She wanted to sleep for eternity, to nurse the ache, to clean the wound inside the quiet of her mind. So she swam to the deepest, most hidden part of herself and wrapped herself inside the muted haze of not-reality, trusting that one of *them* would take her place.

They did not fail.

She knows, detachedly, that the whole Okiya seemed to wake at her screams. She feels it from somewhere far away, a set of arms unwinding from around her, being dragged away, and the soreness of her own bleeding throat.

For a while, she stops caring.

The feeling doesn't go away for a while. Days, in fact. When she comes back to herself, the hurt isn't gone and she knows in her heart that this isn't going to be her last episode. She can read these signs, and she is intimately familiar with the symptoms. What she gains from the whole thing is the exhausted realization that the ache will never go away.

Well, that and permanent damage to her vocal chords that will forever make her voice sound oddly husky, which might become attractive later in life, but sounds God fucking awful on a child. Wonderful.

She understands that she has done something horrible, something terrible to see. She has taken a life, but that it is okay. It is okay not to regret that pitiful creature's passing. She understands she is far away from where she was and that things are different here, that morals won't remain the same. She accepts that part of her relished in that creature's destruction. That it is okay, that she can use that part of her in a world like this.

Ryuishi (and Cat, and the others inside her soul) will just have to cope with it, learn to live with it. Just like they did in the last life.

Meeting an Odd Child

I do not own Naruto.

Kisame Hoshigaki is severely disgruntled when he learns that there will be no training today. He is even more upset when he learns his shishou is blowing off training for a visit to a brothel. He is completely annoyed when he is told that he is to be joining his teacher's visit.

He is wholly and totally pissed when, after all of this nonsense, he is stuck in a room and told to wait.

So when the knock comes and a husky voice politely inquires if a cup of tea would please him and he affirms, he is not exactly in the mood to see a well dressed brat step through, see his appearance, and freeze.

He scowls at the girl. Of course the little thing would be scared of his looks, his strangely colored skin and blade like teeth. This is exactly what I need, he thinks sarcastically, a little whore's daughter to step in and act all horrified, maybe call for help because a demon got into their shitty brothel. This soft looking little girl wouldn't last a second on the streets or in the field, with her silky looking hair and clean civilian hands that have calluses and... scars... on the... knuckles...

Kisame looks up, meets coal black eyes, and is instantly perplexed.

"My fucking God, you're beautiful," the brat's husky voice breathes out.

Suddenly there is a rush of movement and the tea is on the table and a brat's fearless hands in his face. He makes a startled choking noise, thrown off by the words, and then the girl, who can't be older than six, is in his personal space. Her chubby hands are running over his cheekbones, the ends of her fingers rubbing his skin. They

stay there for only a few seconds before they are moving up into his hair, and she makes the strangest cooing noise when she touches it, digging her small hands into the blue locks gently and making odd sounds between her sudden blabbering.

"Oh my God, oh my fucking God! Look at you!" A cheery squeak, "You're all... young and stuff! And here I am, with the great honor of touching the Hoshigaki Kisame! I would fucking cream my jeans if my body had any hormones." She laughs at her own words and continues, "Sweet bundles of baby kittens, you are precious. What are you, twelve? Thirteen? And already tall as a fucking oak tree, hah! You gotta be shittin' me! How-Atckhh!" and finally she makes a gurgling, choking noise.

A hand is wrapped around the back of the girl's kimono, tugging her away, and he can breathe again. Kisame is appalled by the woman's silent and abrupt entry; so quiet even he could not hear it. This newcomer was no simple whore. He looks up and catches the eye of another woman with salt and pepper hair pulled tight into the style of a geisha, her painted crimson mouth turned into a polite smile and her hazel eyes sparkling. It is her aged hand that is wrapped tightly around the child's clothes, and the little girl suddenly looks very, very nervous.

"Okaa-sama, no, I just was greeting this young gentleman-" the sweating child tries to explain, eyes darting frantically to him, their dark depths practically begging for help.

He's too shocked to do anything right now, not that he would anyway.

"One moment please, young sir," the elderly matron says in a sweet, venomous voice, dragging the brat away. The brat who was valiantly attempting to wriggle out of her own clothing to get away. The two disappear out the door, which is slid shut behind them, and Kisame is left alone to stare at his cup of steaming tea in pure bewilderment.

Then, from behind his screen, he can hear them again. This whole thing seems to have turned into some strange kabuki theater. He

expected an uncomfortable visit, maybe having to receive 'The Talk' from shishou. Probably a version with far too many sword euphemisms. Perhaps he was going to sit here until his teacher... finished, and then they would train. In one horrible scenario, his teacher might have forced him into a room with one of the girls. He did not expect 'inadvertently listening in on a brat's punishment' to be on the schedule.

"No Okaa-sama! Have mercy, mercy!" the child's voice cries out, and it is followed with the sound of something solid hitting soft flesh several time in rapid succession, followed by a keening wail.

Kisame winces and shifts in his seated place in sympathy. He knows the sound of a good swatting when he hears it. Maybe the little whore's daughter could survive a day or two on the streets...

Suddenly the door slides open again, and there the matron is with her arms crossed, standing tall and imposing behind the kneeling figure of the kid. In a single smooth motion the child is bowing, her voice smooth and clear when he knows for a fact that she had gotten some not-so-nice corporal punishment not seconds before.

"Please forgive me, sir. I was shown the error of my ways. I endeavor to better entertain you in the future," she intones apologetically.

Satisfied, the matron nods and goes to leave, but not before sending steely eyes towards the-probably-faux repentant child.

The door slides closed and the kid zips back up, sending a disgusted look at the closed screen, her nose wrinkled and eyes narrowed.

"Fuckin' bitch." she spits venomously, ignoring him.

Kisame can't take this anymore.

"What?"

"What do mean what?" she replies haughtily, turning to face him.

Kisame's eyes flash, and he locks eyes with the brat again. He is flustered and off balance, and he knows that can lead to nothing good.

"I mean," he grits out between clenched teeth, "What the hell just happened? Why did any of that happen? Why did you touch me? Who the hell are you?"

The girl's gaze is surprisingly cool for a moment, and it reminds him of the looks he sees older jounin give the fresh genin. It is bored, detached, and dismissive. It is infuriating.

"I'm a liar. But most people just call me Ryuishi." she says.

He is momentarily taken aback by the bluntness of her words, then notices that she answered exactly none of his questions, and finally wonders the truth of the statement. Can a liar be a liar if the very first thing they tell you about themselves is that single fact? It does explain all the compliments before, but it is no skin off his back if that is the case. In fact, it seems the whole episode cost her skin off of hers. Either way, it does not explain the lack of fear, the insistent touches.

"So the whole thing was a show for the old lady?" He guesses, confused.

She snorts and scoots closer, away from the door, nearer to him. He is still confused.

"No, not really. I guess I was just really excited to see you, especially since you're... well, just look at you. So cute and young and adorable."

"I'm older than you. And you just admitted to being a liar," he grouses, eyeing her warily, "I hate liars."

The girl shrugs and makes an unconcerned face. "Even liars can't lie all the time. That would be exhausting. You just have to figure out when they're telling the truth and when they're not." She holds up a finger for a moment, and then points it at him. "Hint: this time, I was not."

She pauses for a moment, before a fox's smile stretches across her face.

"Lying, that is. I wasn't lying."

He doubts that. It does not seem to matter though, so he picks up his tea and give it a sniff, unable to detect anything poisonous about it. It smells simply of strong oolong, nothing more. He would have preferred some sugar in it, but he will deal with what he was given. Kisame decides to ignore her, and just drinks his tea. He takes a sip-

"Can I play with your hair?"

-and promptly chokes on it, coughing and sputtering liquid all over the table. Still hacking, he viciously wipes away the liquid around his mouth and swivels around to look at the kid. She is sitting still, watching him calmly, a tiny smile curling the side of her lips upward. She is every image of a miniature hostess. He glares at her.

"You did that on purpose, you brat!"

"Yes. But I also want to play with your hair. I am an innocent, adorable, naive six year old. I have found interest in your wild blue locks, and desire to delight myself by playing with your fucking hair. Will you indulge the cutesy whims of a child?"

"Adorable? Now I know you're a liar," he scoffs out.

"Okay, maybe not adorable. I still wanna play with your hair though."

Kisame groans dramatically and goes to stare mournfully into his cup of tea, trying to find answers in the opaque green liquid. Why did his

shishou bring him here? Why is this brat so annoying? What does she want with him? Why is she sitting so close?

"Look," he begins forcefully. "I know you don't want to do that. I get that you have to put on a good show for the matron, but no you can't touch my hair. I bet you don't even want to touch it, anyways. So you can go back to whatever whore's kids do, and tell your boss that the scary shark kid sent you away-"

There's a tiny hand in his mouth.

It tastes like salt and bitter herbs.

His expression must be a thing of beauty, because her look is triumphant, her smile smug and victorious.

"Ok, first things first roh hui kecil, you have some options here. " Her fingers wriggle a little across his tongue, but he is too astounded to do little more than gag. "You can choose to see my hand in your mouth as an attack and treat it as such. You can chomp my hand off with those crazy fucking teeth of yours and I can live my entire shitty life without the use of this limb. You won't get in trouble, because you're a genin, a valuable asset to the village, while I am nothing more than an akasenko, a whore's kid, a civilian. You can be just like any other low level shinobi."

She pauses there and looks him in the eyes, the smile slipping off her face. There is saliva dripping down her wrist. Her eyes are sharp for a kid, they are bright and much too observant.

"Or, you can believe that I chose not to attack you. You can choose to believe that I stuck my hand in the mouth of a 'scary shark kid', the most dangerous looking physical feature you have, to show him that his skin color, his eyes, his knife like teeth mean nothing to me. You can choose to believe that I am giving a complete stranger the ability to take this hand away from me forever, with no cost to them, to prove I can think for my god damned self."

The brat is as unrelenting as the oncoming tide, her arm extended fully, her weak little wrist placed placidly between his jagged teeth. Already he can taste blood from the scrapes she got while jamming her hands inside. Her eyes are meeting his unflinchingly, and he narrows his own, momentarily stiffening his jaw and increasing the pressure on her wrist. Her own jaw clenches in preparation for the pain, her nostrils flaring, but she does not flail and try to scramble away.

She is standing beside this gamble, ready to pay the toll if her guess is wrong.

There is a long moment, and he opens his mouth and pushes her spit-covered hand out of his mouth with his tongue, watching it fall to her lap.

He immediately goes for his tea, swishing it around his mouth vigorously. She laughs.

"Aw, c'mon, that's hurtful. I don't have that many germs," she chuckles out, discreetly wiping her hand on the bottom of her robes, lightly dabbing at the thin lines of red.

He looks at her again, seeing her in a new light.

"You have got to be the weirdest, stupidest brat I have ever met. Who does that, who is that stupid? I could have just pushed you back and then walked away, what then? What if I really did just bite your hand off?" He exclaims after swallowing his fourth mouthful, turning on her with a judgmental expression.

"Well, I would have gotten my fucking answer. Now I get to play with your hair," she remarks, smile back on her face, hand reaching forward. He snorts and bats it out of the air with ease. He won't be caught off guard again, not by this little brat.

"No you do not! I never said that."

She drops her hand with a forlorn sigh, looking up at him through squinted coal orbs. Kisame pins them against his own from the corner of his eyes.

"You're really bustin' my balls here, kid."

"You have a foul mouth for a six year old girl." He pauses. "And I'm older than you."

It is her turn to snort. "I live in a brothel, not a monastery. Forgive me if hookers are a terrible influence."

Kisame, very skillfully, does not choke again. He supposes he will have to get used to things like this if he takes an interest in this brat. And isn't that strange, him taking a liking to her odd ways. Well, more liked a forced acceptance, really. She didn't give him much choice. He decides the best way to deal with this is to ignore her.

"So, what? I play super duper cute baby hostess while yah drink yah shitty tea? Is that's how it's gonna be?" she queries, voice lilting like a cheap thug's.

He enjoys the delicate balance of bitter and smoky on his tongue for a moment, seemingly deep in thought. His small orbs trace the patterns of light that escape through the thin screen, watching dust motes dance in the air. The air is calm and smells like the garden in the square outside. This is a nice brothel, he muses, much better than many in the district. It must cost at least a B-rank for a night, at least. Somehow, the stink of the city is gone and the building fosters an aura of tranquility and peace.

"Oi! You better not be ignoring me!" She hisses, leaning closer, "I ain't gonna play games with a fucking tween who can't even pop a boner. Listen here, slick-"

The wood paneling is a nice touch, he thinks. It's a nice break from the concrete that is so common in Kiri. He takes another sip of his tea, it really is quite good. The ambiance of the place must be nice at

night, and he imagines that the red lights of the district must settle quite nicely over the soft, warm tones they used to color the establishment.

"-that's it, I take it back. I don't wanna play with your hair. It's not nice at all, doesn't look soft or fluffy or nothin'. I lied like a lying liar. Yah wanna fuckin fight? 'Cause, genin or not-"

"Oh? Did I hear that right, little girl?"

The two jump at the voice, and Kisame whips his head around to face the gargantuan man standing in the doorway behind them. His form is enormous, and can barely fit through the doorway. Coupled with the giant sword on his back, he cuts an imposing figure.

"Shishou," Kisame greets.

There is a sharp inhale from the girl beside him, and she makes a swift movement away so that there is a respectable distance between the two. Her jaw clenches tight, but there is suddenly a submissive, welcoming smile on her face as she looks at his teacher.

"It is my pleasure to make you acquaintance, sir," she murmurs softly, a complete one-eighty from her previous nattering, husky tone.

His teacher scoffs and scowls down at the girl, his eyes darting to her hands, taking in the hardened skin there, and the blood on her wrist. He notes that she respectfully does not meet his gaze, and instead bows her head to face the ground.

"Did I or did I not just hear you challenge my student?" He grunts out, letting the girl feel the full weight of his gaze. "Lie and I will end you right here, girl."

"I am flattered that you would waste so much effort on a flea like me, sir-" she defers softly, her body language lax.

"-Don't attempt to flatter your way out, or direct my attention elsewhere again. Answer the question," he orders.

Kisame is quiet and accepting, but he does not understand why his teacher is so upset about the girl. She is just a kid, and kids talk crap all the time. It was one thing if a fellow genin, or even if a chunin disregarded him and threatened him. Those would be a slight not only to his own skill, but his shishou's ability as a teacher. But coming from a civilian? That was no threat to a swordsman's honor. So why was he acting this way?

The girl breathes out a soft sigh, and looks up, finally showing her face to his teacher.

"Yes, sir. I did challenge your student to a spar," she admits, her tone remorseful.

Her examines her closely, then looks to his student speculatively. His student suddenly feels a little nervous, and shifts in his place, relieving some of the pressure on his legs. He waits in the awkward silence patiently.

"He accepts. Now, in the outer courtyard."

Kisame is aghast. Him against a civilian? It's going to be a slaughter! If he wins, he's a bully, if he refuses, he forfeits and becomes a laughingstock. This whole thing has to be a joke! His mouth is suddenly dry despite the tea.

He does not want to be either of those things.

"Kagami Okaa-sama would be-" she begins, apparently smart enough to realize what a death trap this is.

"Kagami has already entered negotiations with me on the subject of your Mizuage."

The girl chokes on her spit, whipping her head up to look his teacher in the face, throwing away any feigned respect. Her eyes dart around his solid form, desperately searching for any hint of a lie. She is frantic in her observation, trying to snuff out any signal or sign of untruth. When she finds none, her small face is instantly filled with fury. Her hands tighten into fists and tremble at her side. Her tan skin is flushed red, and her jaw is clenched so tight he can hear her teeth creaking. She is openly glaring at the behemoth shinobi, her nostrils flaring and eyes filled with anger.

"You will spar with my student in the outer courtyard, or I will offer her something she cannot refuse." He commands her, his eyes dangerous.

The girl leaps to her feet, hands fisted by her side, and meets his eyes hatefully. She holds them for a long moment before stomping away towards the designated arena.

"Shishou, she's just-" Kisame begins.

His teacher turns on him, his gaze calm and maybe a little bloodthirsty. His grin reveals rows of sharp, pointed teeth and an unbearable smugness.

"Kisame, listen close." he says in a lecturing tone, "That brat's Okiya Mother called me in to pay for an old favor. She says the girl is loud, blunt and too cunning for her own good. I thought she was lying. But you know what changed my mind?" he questions.

Kisame gulps. The man's tone does not bode well. "No sir," he answers.

"About the same time Kagami-san called, I got word from the owner of Kubikiribocho. His student, who is still in the academy, told him about somebody, who fits the girls description, brutally and efficiently take down a hostile by tearing their throat out with her teeth. While being caught in a hold. Apparently everybody is confused as to why

such a good prospect is not in the Academy, especially on with tensions running so high." his sensei tells him.

Kisame almost couldn't believe it. The girl was six! But...

But the girl's eyes were too observant, and she was completely unafraid to touch him, to engage in conversation with someone who looked like he did. She was quick enough to touch him before he could stop her when she first came in. She was apathetic enough to stick her hand in his mouth, and to not care about the pain of the cuts later.

Usually they chose Academy candidates by picking up the tougher ringleaders of the orphans, and then mixing them with the clan kids. It's how Kisame himself was chosen. Almost all of the children had a body count before they even began, directly or indirectly.

He supposed this girl was no different.

"I understand, Shishou," he grunts out, crossing his arms.

Then he trails out behind his teacher to fight a six-year-old.

AN: Kecil hiu roh (Little shark spirit), in Indonesian. Vague, but there. Also, cannon characters! Yay! Double also, hints that Ryuishi took her pledge to train a bit seriously. But, don't expect it to show much from the next chapter. It's only been about a year, with no teacher or assistance in form.

As for the orphan thing, it seems to me every kiri nin shown is some kind of crazy orphan. Like, the entire village might be filled with orphans. I think that kids might have run of low things on the streets, under the supervision of older, more experienced people, much how gangs work in third world countries. It would make sense that the academy, who canonically supports bloodsport and encourages violence, would get to pick the cream of the crop.

I would also like to thank my beautiful new soundboard, the Hate Child! Bless their wonderful soul.

Meeting the Contents of your Stomach

I do not own naruto.

"Fuck, fuck, fuckity fuck fuck," Ryuishi hisses under her breath, tromping her way to the outer courtyard. "Twelve fucking cocks in a bucket full of butts."

Watanabe Ryuishi is six years old, and today she is going to die.

Well, maybe not really, but there is a good chance of it. She really shouldn't have been so feisty around one of the Seven Swordsmen's apprentices, but goddamn, she never imagined it would end like this. Maybe Kisame would have thought she was too blunt. Maybe he would have been a giant douchebag. Perhaps, the two would have personalities that couldn't mesh. But no, after some struggle, the very first canon character she meets gets along fine with her! (By some very loose standards of course.)

They bickered, she laughed, he even spat tea! It had been the beginning of a beautiful friendship. Then, wonder of all wonders, she fucks up.

Again, she didn't think things through. She didn't consider the words coming out of her mouth, how offensive they could seem. She didn't pay attention to her surroundings, and then went and blabbed a challenge to a boy who had to be at least six fucking years older, right on the verge of puberty, with enough training to kick her ass ten ways to tuesday.

This isn't going to be a spar, or even a duel. It's going to be a slaughter.

Ryuishi wasn't lying when she said that Kisame could kill her and get away with it. Mist had a shit view on civilians. The whole of ninja

society did, incidentally. Shinobi, from what she had seen, seemed to have no care for their non-military counterparts. In the show and the manga, the only reason a civilian would appear would be to hire a team for a mission, or to make the ninja look better in comparison. Sometimes, like in the cases of Teuchi and Ayame, who owned the infamous Ichiraku ramen stand, it showed them performing their duty, which was serving their Shinobi overlords. It was a subtle but insidious thing in what she remembers. Genin teams would help out with common, everyday chores performed by civilians, all the while nattering about how boring and lame they were.

The comments, while funny at the time, exposed a darker side to the Elemental Nations. Ninja did not care about the lives of civilians. This was doubly obvious in Kirigakure. Shinobi laughed when they recounted tales of assaulting business owners and day labourers. Those returning from outside the village enthusiastically recounted tales of battle against dangerous opponents, ignoring how a single jutsu would ruin the farmland around them, tearing up crops and ruining soil, thus destroying the lives of farmers. Trade caravans were regularly assaulted, and no one could connect the dots to the loss of trade, it seemed.

Ninja could not support a farm, and they could not continue in most trades. Few owned businesses, and fewer had marketable skills outside mercenary work. This, alongside their ignorant behavior, left the everyday people indignant and angry, and they far outnumbered their ninja brethren. It seemed that the entire system was a powder keg, waiting for a single spark to burst into civil war. The daimyo did nothing to control his military dogs, and rarely outstretched a helping hand to his people. The whole situation was begging to be taken advantage of.

Ryuishi mourns the fact that she will be too dead to do anything after today. Then she snorts. She'll be double dead. Death twice over. Hah.

Then she thinks of the empty void, the haunting, endless abyss, and quickly turns her thoughts away from that direction.

She supposes that the meeting she had last month with Hanako and the other orphans will be her last. She wishes the blond haired girl luck with her growing gang. Maybe she has time to write her a letter? No, Hanako can barely read. It seemed a silly thing to teach the group she had met that day, and all their subsequent meetings had been filled with new faces and more lessons about survival and how to stay unnoticed. Man, she really should have taught them to read. What kind of monster was she, leaving starving orphans on the streets, never showing them the wonders of literacy...

Argh! Enough! She has to get her mind in the fight! Even if she's (definitely, for sure) going down, she won't do it quietly!

After all, that goddamn, motherfucking, piece of trash teacher of Kisame's threatened her with something worse than death.

She lets the outrage at the man's brashness fill her. He had been dealing with Kagami Okaa-sama, negotiating for her Mizuage. The thought of it floods her little body with fear and hate, which she carefully fans until the gale inside her heart turns manageable. She will use it in the upcoming fight. Maybe it will make the punches hurt less. She hopes so.

She broods about it as she stalks the halls. The brothel emulated the geisha culture in many ways, only, yah know, seedier and more prostitute oriented. Right now she would be considered a maiko, an apprentice, too young to deal with adult dealing. It should have stayed that way for a long, long while. Yet, Kagami Okaa-sama was negotiating her Mizuage. The Mizuage was a ceremony for initiation into the working girls ranks. Here, in a brothel, it meant that the Matron was considering selling her virginity already. Kagami was trying to whore her out, that bitch! It should have never come up so soon, and it led her to believe that the giant man was not only using his political clout, but offering obscene amounts of money. Or so she assumed.

So, weaponless, angry, and dressed in a beautiful kimono, Ryuishi steps out into the outer gardens. (She will relish ruining the fine

piece of clothing. It's the least she can do to Kagami for being an underhanded, traitorous hag.)

The outer gardens are actually a polite euphemism for the muddy, run down, half acre plot of land behind the Okiya. The ground is mushy and unsteady, and there is little plant life. The area is commonly used for the back door dealings of the brothel and a place to sneak out for the girls. It is also where the food, cosmetics, and other supplies are delivered, so that the unwashed workers from the trade district do not have to be seen in front of the business. It smells like a scum, and she can feel her geta slip into it. Smiling, she slips them off and lets the slime squish between her toes, happily examining the bottom of her robes trail in the filth. This single action serves the dual purpose of giving her more traction and getting her clothes dirty. Content in costing the brothel owner money she stalks towards the side of the plot, the hair dangling from high ponytail swishing with her steps.

She notes to keep the environment in mind during the fight, and subtly begins to stretch. Behind her she can hear the footsteps of the other two, and thinks that it is kind of them to let her hear their approach. As shinobi they could just as easily appear out of nowhere, or silently slip up directly behind her. Like that bastard teacher had done when he had entered the room.

With little direction, Kisame takes the side opposite of her. His shishou watches from the doorway.

Kisame looks fierce and determined, his bokken loose in his hands, but maybe that's just from her perspective as dead-girl-walking. She doesn't think her ego could take it if he looked anything but competent. It's already suffered serious blows today, and is probably gonna be crippled from the beating she is about to receive from a twelve year old. Her vanity is screaming at her from inside her head for getting their clothes dirty, and reminding her how ugly they look when they fight. She ignores them, and lets her mind focus on surviving for as long as possible.

Ryushi breathe in, holds it, lets her *angerfrustrationfear* fill her, and lets the breath flood out.

"You may begin," the giant man says.

She drops down into the mud and rolls forward, underneath the strike that sends a small splash of swampy earth raining down. Kisame is fast, faster than she has any hope of being, but she rolls underneath his first strike, coating herself and her pretty robes in filth. She can see his foot raise up, ready to stomp down on her, and she rolls underneath that too.

His foot crashes down behind her with an insane amount of force, sending a out a small wave of filth. It upsets his balance on the slick terrain and he stumbles a bit before regaining it.

Ryuishi uses that time to scramble up, keeping her center of gravity low and her weight shifting between her feet, her toes digging into the slime. It's a bastardization of a horse stance, but it keeps her grounding firm.

Kisame is quick to spin around, using the moment of his turn to add more force behind his upward slash. She leans away, letting one palm grip the muck behind her, another held firm in front of her face. Her robes pull her down and restrict her movements, and she almost, almost regrets her bokken sweeps upward and only misses her nose by a centimeter, sending her bangs flying.

(Not the face, not the face! It's so cute, don't ruin that!)

His arms are up and she shifts her weight, leaving it all on one foot while the other leg arcs up, aiming for his ribs, the force of a full body twist behind it. He deftly grabs it, removing a hand from his training sword, halting the blow. She keeps moving through the twist, letting her other leg leave the earth, and sends a palm full of mud at his face right before he flings her to the side.

She slams down hard and her whole body rolls through the muck. She is covered in it now, and the outer robe will probably forever smell like a quagmire.

She scrambles up again, ignoring the screaming in the ankle he caught and used to throw her. Ryuishi lets herself slide into the bastard horse stance again, mentally thanking her old father for being such a paranoid bastard. Yet, if she wants to live a little longer, she knows she'll have to get in close again, close enough that his stick won't be able to strike her.

Kisame is wiping mud of his face, bokken at his side, looking so absolutely done with everything it startles a laugh out of her. His beady eyes lock onto her and he scowls, displaying his vicious teeth.

Then he is in front of her, and his bokken is lodging itself in her gut lengthwise, driving the air from her lungs and her stomach into her trachea. It is hard enough to bend her body around it, but her stance is firm enough that she doesn't go flying, only slides back.

(Kisame regrets doing this because it sends the mud from her robes flying off of her, and onto him.)

Still bent over his sword, her arms up and guarding, Ryuishi loses her lunch. Kisame makes a disgusted sound and backs away, and she turns her head, instinctively trying to keep an eye on the opponent when another wave climbs its way up her throat and fountains out of her lips, right onto his pants.

"Aaaargh!" the blue boy bellows in repulsion, hands outstretched to his sides, glaring at the

half digested remains of rice and salted salmon dripping down his pants.

Panicked, in pain and seeing an opportunity, Ryuishi lunges, tackling his legs, and smashing her face into her own up chuck. He topples and lands with a splat into the mud. He immediately retaliates and

she can feel one, two, three solid strikes to her skull before she's knocked out.

Fuguki Suikazan, jonin of Kirigakure, member of the renowned seven swordmen, current wielder of Samehada, has never laughed so hard in his entire life.

His student is currently shoving an unconscious six year old off his lap and scrambling away from the prone girl's form. His back is covered with mud, and his front is covered with projectile vomit.

Seeing the boy's shattered expression as he looks down at himself makes him laugh even harder. His bellowing reverberates in the mist laden air, and there are actual tears gathering in the corner of his eyes. He hopes to never, ever forget his student's priceless expression in this moment, and he knows that he will never have to warn the boy of the dangers of striking an opponent in the gut again after this.

He is leaning against the doorframe for support and his protruding gut is hurting as bad as it does after a hard workout, but he can't seem to stop the shaking. Behind him he can hear Kagami-san and another woman slide around the corner, eager to learn the results of this particular test.

He looks up and gestures to the plot of land wordlessly, still laughing. The woman, who must surely be the girl's mother, looks startled and wide-eyed at the state of her daughter, but is well educated enough to hide her distress in front of a shinobi. Kagami just eyes him with a curious, if calculating, gaze.

"Well?" the weathered matron asks, taking in the scene, a single thin eyebrow raised high on her brow.

Fuguki reigns in his chuckles, standing tall once more, carefully keeping his eyes off his student-lest he burst into laughter once

more. "She certainly is Academy material. I will stand as her sponsor," he intones with a grin.

The Okiya mother smirks victoriously, and even the mother looks relieved. It doesn't surprise him. If the girl hadn't shown her ability her today, she would most likely would have started training as a brothel runner, and then an initiate. As it is, the child has shown enough promise to enter training. The Zabuza brat will be elated.

The test had begun long before the spar, of course. They had been under observation since the moment she had stepped inside the room with his student. When faced with a customer so obviously bearing the Kiri hitai-ate the child had immediately gone to ingratiate herself with the target, pushing him in different ways to get a read on his personality. It had started with the immediate invasion of personal space, and then continued with blunt honesty and perseverance for the sake of the goal. The brat had even managed to worm her way into shocking his student, fearlessly offering a limb to prove herself. The whole time the girl had kept in control of the conversation, seamlessly moving from an over enthusiastic persona who used her age as a shield from more serious repercussions, to a sarcastic one that belied her wit, to bold one that showcased situational cunning, and finally ending in aggression. He severely doubts she even knew what she was doing at the time, or that she did any of it at all, but each trait was something every Academy candidate has to have in some form or another.

Her physical display was not disappointing either. The girl did not run away from the fight, facing the consequences of her brash words, most likely only because of his earlier insinuations. She did not immediately attack, or attempt to strong arm her way through. Fuguki is certain she knew she could not win from the beginning. She did not land a single blow, but she did display a good amount of flexibility and a creative use of the environment around her. The fact that she was ready to strike at any opening presented, even if it meant a face full of her own sick, speaks well of her future ruthlessness.

"I will begin her papers immediately. Keiko, gather your child, and send one of the other girls down with a change of clothes and some food for the young master. Perhaps even a bath."

The young mother accepts her orders graciously, bowing respectfully to the both of them before rushing to the mud covered form of her offspring.

"Will you accompany me to my office for some celebratory sake, Suikazan-sama?" the smug Matron asks, her lips quirked upward in a tight smile that makes her seem years younger. For a second, Fuguki sees a flash of the woman from twenty years ago, dressed in the form fitting gear and giving that same smile, her hair trailing behind her. He grins wider, and motions for her to go forward.

"Only if you don't mind reminiscing as you finish up that paperwork, Kagami-san."

She only raises her brow once more, smile still on her face, and nods in acquiescence, beginning to walk away. He looks back to his dejected student, waving his arm to catch his attention. The boy looks up, scowl across his face.

"Good work boy. Let the girls take care of you, and we'll leave in a little while."

Then he is stalking after the matron, licking his lips at the thought of sake and nostalgia.

AN: Sorry for the late update! The site had some repairs to do. And if you think the fight is short, please remember at this point in time Kisame is a genin, and so far Ryuishi has only been training by herself. The ass whooping was inevitable.

Interlude: Hanako and Zabuza

I do not own Naruto. Slight gore trigger

Hanako is a child with no last name.

There are many of them in Kirigakure, running around on the streets, scared and alone. The orphanages will not take them in, because they are reserved for the children of war and business, taking in only the descendants of those who died in battle or those who were born from a higher children of whores and day laborers are not given such consideration.

Or, they weren't.

Everything changed two years ago, when a nameless girl appeared, as if born from the mist itself, and began to teach them. Hanako has learned much from that little girl, and is in fact still learning. She first showed them how to harvest eels from the water, and then crayfish, and then roots and tubers and herbs. She taught them how to weave beds from the river reeds and how to hide themselves from the adults. From her they learned how to keep moving, to keep their groups small, no larger than three at a time, how to scatter their ashes and hide their dens. The little girl coached them on being hidden in plain sight, how to misdirect attention when somebody looked too hard. A civilian would look away if they scrunched their faces just so, as if about to burst into tears, and looked them in the eyes. A shinobi would look away if they showed fear and awe, and begged them for tidbits.

The girl taught them how to survive, how to be the living ghosts of the mists, hidden in plain sight. All she ever asked in return was that they show other children, and never, ever tell anybody about her.

(This is easy, because Hanako still does not know the girl's name, even after all this time.)

Sometimes, the delicate looking child would appear again, and the orphans' lessons would begin anew, as if they had never stopped. She would come, wreathed in mist, to one of the original three that she had found in the alley that day, and teach. Only, there were more children now who knew how to do these things, because Hanako did what she was asked, venturing onto other gangs' turf and teaching the gospel of the girl who came from nowhere.

I can show you how to feed yourselves. How to stay alive.

You deserve to live, just because you are.

Hanako... Hanako doesn't know what to think about the girl from nowhere. She is so unlike anyone she has ever met. No one she has ever met has done the things that the girl has. No one ever treated her with respect and kindness before that fateful day. No one had ever looked at her and said that what they saw pleased them. No one ever took time away from their lives to teach her things. Nobody ever saw Hanako, accepted her, and cared for her.

She knows that girl is not homeless like them. She knows she has a family. She knows that she eats well, and wears pretty clothes and she smells nice. The girl shared those things, gave them part of her world. She told them stories and cleaned their cuts. She gave them things, and gave them power to give to others. She shared her strength without a price. Hanako can see it in her eyes when she looks out on the faces of the children who are older than her, younger than her, dirtier and poorer than her. Hanako can see that the girl loves them, freely and without cost. It is her way, who she is.

Hanako loves her for it.

She loves the strange little girl with clean kimonos and death in her eyes, and because she loves her, she hates this village. She hates how the strangers pass her by and do not see her. She hates that no

one tries to help them. She hates that the shinobi abuse them, that they kill them on the streets like animals. She hates the cruelty and the savageness of Mist. She hates them, because the little girl showed her what they could be. Hanako wants to show others this vision too.

Hanako is a smart girl, and though not particularly strong, she is quick and clever when it comes to people. She never teaches the gang that caters to the adults, or the factions from which the shinobi like to recruit. She steers clear of the little ones who are not old enough to keep a secret, and the older ones who are too used to the way things are. She is strict and discerning when choosing her students. She does not want to fail the one person who gave her a chance, the one who showed her that she could be more than a nameless, starving orphan. Everyone she teaches, she asks to teach others.

The practice spreads.

They mark themselves in different ways, ways that the adults brush off as grubby children's play. She hears whispers from the others she goes to visit: children in the market district are wearing feathers in their hair, and those down by the docks are stringing fishbones and shells into jewelry, just like the kids in the akasen wore burnished bottle caps and torn kimono strips on their person. They are tokens only shown to those who know what to look for, a secret shared by the nameless little ghosts.

The bones, feathers, shells, caps and metal strips all mean something though. They mean that they are a tribe.

Hanako knows what the girl meant now, when she said that no child would be alone anymore. They are bound together by their lessons, tied to each other at first by a simple act of kindness. The kids she teaches are always grateful for their first meal, and later the work they share making traps and erasing their steps strings them together even more. The more time the children share in their small

groups, the more those strings weave together into an unbreakable chain that binds the nameless children into a family.

So when that mysterious girl steps out of the fog, Hanako is glad to see her. She is not glad for long though.

"I will not be able to come after today's lesson," the child says.

"They chose yah for the Academy, didn't they?" Hanako asks, worry filling her. You cannot get away once they have selected you, not unless you're already dead. She can see now why the girl is not wearing a kimono. The baggy black pants take on a sinister look, and the clean grey sleeveless turtleneck no longer looks so cozy. What will Hanako do then, once she is abandoned? Where will she turn now?

The girl looks up at her through thick black lashes, and reaches out to hold her hand. Somehow, the usually comforting gesture is lacking today. "Listen to me Hanako, this lesson is not one I can guide you through. After today, you have to forget you ever knew me. You have to let go, and trust in all the other children. Share skills between each other. Learn to grow from each other, not me," the child says softly, her voice barely carrying to her ears. She can feel the tiny hand squeeze hers, so cold and so small. "I won't forget you, but until I can visit without being noticed, I cannot come again. I won't risk bringing attention to what is happening."

Hanako can see it again, that look she glimpsed on the girls face the first night they met. That look, that *emptyemptyempty*, and knows better than to try and argue. So, in hushed voices, the two share a lesson.

She learns of kingdoms and governments, and something called unalienable rights. She hears of peoples voices shouting out against their rulers, and learns the basics of economy. She is taught to always be aware of ideas, and what people believe in, because ideas and beliefs are powerful things. She learns that it is ok to be afraid, to run, and to hide. That these things are healthy and

sometimes anonymity is safety. She learns that one day, there will be a moment, and she will have to choose. She learns that the tribe is hers now, has always been hers, and she must lead them when that time comes.

"Listen to them, respect them, and they will do the same for you," the thing in a girl's body says.

Then, the girl squeezes her hand just once more and stands tall. The child is younger than her by several years, she thinks, but she has never seen something quite like her before, so she cannot be sure. She has a presence, something that is both hard to find and impossible to forget.

"Take care, Hanako," the girl whispers, right before she is swallowed by the mist and snow. Hanako promises then and there that nobody will ever learn of the girl from her.

Yet...

Yet she will not let her be forgotten.

Soon, a story spreads through the ranks of nameless children, from the trade district to the market, from the akasen to the slum quarters. Every kid who wears a feather in their hair or sports a herringbone necklace knows it.

"Look there," they whisper. "See that magpie on the vine? See that spider in its web? Those are its eyes, which watch over us."

With little hands, they will point. "Do you see that cat near the trash? Can you spot the fox in the reeds? Those are its ears, that hear us."

Small faces will lean in close, eager to talk. "Can hear the dog howling? Do you hear the sparrows chirp? Those are its voice, singing for us."

Tiny eyes will light up with knowing. "Can you see the fish, hidden in the water? See that snake beneath the stone? The toad by the creek?"

"Who? Who is it?" The new ones will ask, impatient. The others will smile, sly and sweet.

"The one who reminds us that we are not alone. The one who knows we matter," they will reply. And Hanako, well, she will just smile along with them.

She knows the plan.

Zabuza Momochi swipes the stone in his hand slowly, lovingly, down the blade of a sword on his lap. He likes the motion, smooth and controlled. He likes to feel the gritty slide of his whetstone down a blade, honing it down. With each stroke the blade in his hand grows a little bit more useful, a little bit better of a tool. He likes that, that something so simple can tame a hunk of steel into a deadly weapon.

He likes control.

If you can control things, then you can use them as your tools. It is nice to use things, because it makes the world simpler. Tools make the world easier. They turn complicated tasks into easy ones. A hammer makes it easy to drive in nails, a fishing rod makes it easy to pluck fish from the water, and a blade makes it easy to take a life. Zabuza like tools almost as much as he likes control.

He slides the stone down the edge of the blade again, caught up in his thoughts. His thumb is dangling off the side of it, and there is a sting, and a bead of crimson. Sudden, irrational rage fills him. His teeth gnash together, and he wants to roar and break and destroy-

He exhales sharply and drives down the rage.

Placidly, he takes the stone in his hand and places it on the boulder to his side. He grips the sword handle in his hand with his uncut hand and squeezes it so tight his knuckles turn ashy white. He inhales deeply, then exhales again, long and slow. Color returns to his flesh. Carefully, he slides the newly sharpened blade into the sheath by his side and lays it down on the hooks behind him and goes back to the cement bench.

He sits down. With calculating, manic eyes, he observes the damage done. His thumb has an inch long slash down the center of it, oozing blood onto the callused pads of his finger. *Training will be harder tomorrow*, he thinks, staring at the liquid. It makes him think of the akasen district, it's streets bathed with red light. The akasen makes him think of the girl.

His heart beat picks up, his breathing sharp. The girl is interesting. It is exciting.

Zabuza remembers that night in perfect clarity, a memory he has played over and over again inside the confines of his head. He remembers going out that night to pick up something for his teacher, ending up in some dirty back alley, waiting behind a pile of trash at the back door of a brothel.

He remembers hearing the wailing first, the sound of a small animal in distress. He had turned his head then, peering through the gloom for the source, struck by a mild curiosity. What he seen was a grown man, his arms carrying an upset girl. She was small, dwarfed by the adults form and size, and she was dressed in the kimono many of the working girls favored. Silently, he watched on as the man dumped her in a pile of garbage and leaned in close, his breath misting in the air. He had faced forward after that, trying to ignore the activity going on only yards away. He didn't need to see this, it was gross, and he wanted to go back and deliver the package already.

"I'm not for sale!" the crying girl's voice screeched as she kicked uselessly.

He turned back at that, eyeing the man with even more disgust. Everyone knew that you didn't steal the young ones if they weren't on display. That was just common sense. The local yakuza would do you in for that, if the brothel didn't hire a shinobi first. It was just bad business, stealing flesh in a place where it was so openly sold.

"Let me go, let me go, *let me go* !" she cried again, her quaking voice filling the air.

He almost groaned out loud. Couldn't the little baby do anything other than cry? This was Kiri, not Konoha. No one was going to help her, and her voice was really grating on his nerves. Her kicks held no strength, and her hands were already pinned. Such a weak little thing shouldn't be out this late in the first place, especially if she wasn't for sale. It was stupid. She was weak and stupid. Maybe she deserved this.

The man leaned in close, and he could see his hands roaming, trapping the girls struggling limbs and pressing her close to him, caging her. She was dead already, she just didn't know it. The hold utilized the man's greater size and strength, and he saw the realization in her expression as the man pressed her into a makeshift embrace.

Then, he remembers, what that man held wasn't a little girl anymore.

It was if the whole thing happened at a slower pace than the world around them. The girl's eyes shuttered, and what looked out of them was hungry and alive. The dark orbs were filled with the malice and blood-lust of the beast that was possessing her. Her mouth descended and sunk into the tender flesh of his neck. The monster tore at the man, shook her head and ripped with her jaws. Blood steamed in the night air and flooded down her face and her pretty robes, staining them both. Her hand reached up and joined in the carnage, shredding the flesh of her assaulter, killing him then and there.

Zabuza remembers the excitement that ran in his veins, that shuddered and clawed through his heart. He recalls the possessiveness that shot through him when he looked at her, snarling and spitting and roaring at the corpse, her hair wild and robes askew. He recalls the need to own that monster, the one that stomped on the dead man's eyes and popped them like grapes, the creature that flung the flesh back at the dead body and howled in the night the success of her kill.

He remembers the demon that dressed itself once more in the skin of a child and walked calmly back into the night.

Zabuza looks at his thumb, and the trailing red. He places his bleeding appendage in his mouth, and wonders if the taste is the same she tasted that night. He wants that girl. He wants her to be his tool, to control her and wield her where and when he needs. He wants to tame her and temper her and hone her just like the blade he had held in his hands. He grins at the thought.

A monster, just like him, held at his beck and call. He hears they have finally found her, hiding in her fake skin. He hears that she will be joining the Academy soon.

He will make her his.

AN: Okay! Just a look into some of the minds that Ryuishi is affecting. Thanks again to my beautiful beta, the Hate child, as she makes my work readable. Also, welcome Zabuza!

Meeting a Psycho

I do not own Naruto

The Shinobi Academy of Kirigakure is literally a sad conglomeration of broken concrete buildings mashed together, like an unfortunate pile of particularly bland tortoise shells. There are vines creeping over almost every foot of it, clinging on by invading the spiderweb of cracks. It looks incredibly structurally unsound-not that Ryuishi is knowledgeable in architecture in any possible way. That was not one of the college electives she took, thank you very much. She can tell you a lot about rocks, though. Geology is cool as fuck. It will probably never help her become a ninja in any possible way though, which sucks. What is she gonna do, identify the metamorphic composition of a doton jutsu as a wall of earth comes flying at her? Probably not. Though, the biology classes are sure to come in handy. Maybe.

Taking a deep breath, she grits her teeth and steps through the dilapidated doorway. She hums the lavender town theme song under her breath, just to really set that horrible, creepy mood that accompanies this learning facility. Nothing quite like the crushed remains of a one-time building to guide you on your path of higher learning. Well, not really higher learning, more like mercenary for hire, uncontrollable sociopath learning. Still, if the song fits...

Each one of her steps echoes quietly through the halls, each in time with the humming. With the mist and the ruins and the darkness, it's really mood setting. She feels like a creepy ghost, and to be honest, it's sorta empowering. Actually, an empowered ghost could be a descriptor for her, what with the whole being dead thing. Could she make that into a ninja moniker? The Ghost of the Mist sounds tight as hell. She loves it already. Now, how to get people to call her that...

She muses for a bit more before she finds herself outside the door to the classroom. It is probably the only solid thing in this place, and is cast in soft shadows. The overhead lighting flickers momentarily, and the number 103 has never looked so ominous.

God, this whole place is a fucking wreck.

She stops humming and pushes the door open with a sigh. The inside of the classroom is a scene straight from a gangster movie. It is poorly lit, and gloomy as hell. There isn't a desk or a chair or a table to be seen. Instead, there is a large, barren, gymnasium type room with a domed ceiling. Children are split into groups with no apparent semblance of order at all. There is no grouping of age here either. (Though she does seem to be the youngest, and oh god that does not bode well at all.) There are large swathes of empty space between groups. Some of them seem to be just talking, while others seem to be playing a dice game, and she can see marbles and ryo being placed as bets. There are no windows, only a few bald light bulbs hanging far above them in places.

All in all, it looks more like a prison yard than a school.

Children are dressed in cobbled together outfits, betraying their less than wealthy backgrounds, and there are only two things that seem to be newly bought or well made. One of them is the weapons, the special kunai that are unique to Kiri, and ninjato and tanto and other assorted blades. It seems that the Mist's shinobi's preferences start young. The other thing is the clan kids' robes, and yes, she can spot the difference already. They are an isolated group, standing in the corner of the room, already running through kata forms. Their robes are tidy, and though their bodies are lean, they are unblemished and clean. The difference is obvious.

The door shuts behind her and all eyes turns to her. Ryuishi suddenly regrets arriving early.

Get a grip. These are all brats. You can do this, she thinks, firmly stepping forward. She meets the inquiring eyes, careful not to betray

her nervousness. Her new, loose black cargo pants sweep silently across the floor and her skintight sleeveless grey turtleneck seems almost too warm. (She learned her lesson about fighting in kimono from her scuffle with Kisame.)

Ryuishi walks determinedly ahead, her eyes on nothing particular. Around her, there are whispers about her age, her gender, her station. Everybody wants information on the new kid, it would seem.

She walks calmly, listening intently to the whispers. If she knows what rumors there are about her, she can twist them to her advantage. She can use them. So intent on her musing, she never notices one of the children separate from the crowd and stalk her steps. Therefore, she is surprised by the strong hand tangling in her high ponytail, causing her to halt her steps, her head jerking back into a hard body. She looks up and comes face to face with a manically grinning boy with short, scruffy hair and dark eyes. She readies herself, believing it to be the start of a fight. She can elbow him and then-

"I know you," he says cryptically, interrupting her train of thought.

"Well, I don't fuckin know you," she spits instinctively, trying to ignore the tugging on her scalp and come up with a workable plan of escape. She fails. It hurts. She should weave barbed wire in her hair tomorrow, so this won't happen again. She mentally jots that down on her 'to do' list. He leans down, and woah, did this boy take lessons in creepy invasion of personal space or what? Her head is tilted back and she can feel his torso directly behind her, giving off heat like a furnace.

"You're the girl from the alley."

Ryuishi's heart stops. It has been two years, but she knows exactly what he is talking about. She remembers every heart stopping second of it. Some one saw that? Was that a thing people knew? It was just one murder, in self defense no less! It's not like there aren't buttloads of corpses lining the back streets of the akasen. She feels

nauseous. Someone saw, someone knows, she's going to get in trouble-

"I knew you'd end up here," he laughs out, pulling her closer by her hair. Her scalp screams out in protest, but she throws an elbow back into his gut anyway. It connects and he grunts, but does not let go.

He turns to the room around them, meeting every other child's eyes challengingly, simply taking the back kick to the shin she gives him.

"THIS ONE," he bellows, giving her head a shake, his hand full of her hair, "IS MINE." The children stare for a moment, only to look away, cowed by the young boy.

(It is an impressive display of intimidation for an eight year old, she thinks.)

She lets out a breath between her teeth, hissing as she struggles against the kid, reaching up to the hand in her hair and digging her nails in. She can feel the flesh give and nearly cries out in joy when the boy tosses her forward. Ryuishi stumbles but plants her feet and turns to face the one who claimed her, angry black eyes glaring furiously up at him.

"I don't belong to anybody, yah piece of shit," she growls out, hands caressing her sore scalp.

The boy laughs, his eyes wide and menacing. He gives her a grin full of sharp teeth (and why does every fucking person she meets in Kiri have those? Do they file them down? Is it genetic? She needs to know, because they really leave an impression, and she's super jealous.) and looks down at her from his towering height of three inches taller than her.

"Well now you belong to Zabuza Momochi," he declares.

She suddenly thinks that maybe she should have just been a hooker.

Their chunin instructor arrives and the groups are divided into three large ones. She is, unsurprisingly, placed in the younger children's class, alongside Zabuza. She believes it is because fate will get a good giggle when she is brutally murdered by the boy, just like everybody else in the class. She elects to pretend she knows nothing about it, and tries to ignore him. The kid will not stop grinning at her threateningly, and it's sorta creeping her out. The day begins with stamina drills, which are run much more like boot camp rucksack marches than any sort of P.E class. This, she is abysmal at. She pants and huffs behind the pack.

Then, they begin to show them the cool down in the form of actual stretches and Academy Basic Katas. Here, she excels, displaying astounding flexibility. Mentally, she is very grateful she started doing her old gymnastic stretches again, alongside all the other training after the whole alley murder thing. One of the chunin instructor snorts when he sees her holding her foot by her head while standing, legs straight, and asks which brothel she came from. She tells him, because advertising is good for business, but makes a note to never go anywhere with him ever.

Then, they do target practice. Here, she is terrible again. (Her astigmatism really bit her in the ass. Not that Kiri would ever let her live if she needed glasses, god forbid. Human euthanasia is a *thing* here, and it is awful.) They show her an example of form only once, then leave. She's atrocious at throwing things. She sinks about maybe three out of sheer aggressiveness, but none of them are near the center, and the others are not even close to the target. Zabuza laughs at her. She proceeds to kick him in the stones. The chunin has to break them up, and she earns a bruise on her collarbone.

After that, they are in a classroom and the teacher is showing the children characters, arithmetic, ninja theory, and history. The first two she completes with ease, and she is baffled by the last. History sounds like something out of North Korea. It's all 'Honorable Mizukage' and 'righteousness of Kirigakure'. It's complete tripe, obvious and shameless propaganda. Ninja theory is fun, and it

covers survival, chakra theory, jutsu, strategy, etc. She thinks it might change week to week. Not to mention, the whole time Zabuza puts his grubby fuckin' mitts in her hair. It's pissing her off. Her hair did look nice this morning, but with his insistent tugging, it looks awful. She can't stand looking bad, and her vanity is weeping.

They break for lunch, and Ryuishi quickly attempts to scramble away, eagerly hopping over the desks to do so. She has to go and brood about how she's going to die, *again*, and how unfair life is while she eats. It's really very important, something that absolutely must be done, you see. Yet, life is a cold bitch, and right as she tucks herself into a shadowed corner and pulls her delicious char sui bao out, it is snatched from her hand. She shrieks. *Loudly* .

When she whirls around, it comes as no surprise that the shitty boy is right there, stuffing his mouth with one of her pork buns. Something inside her breaks. She stands tall, coming up to the boy's neck and is stopped with one, almost lazy, yank to her hair.

"You sack of slimy, offensive, raggedy ass shit! I hope you die! I hope eagles swoop down from the heavens, defecate directly in your mouth, peck out your eyes and then rip off your nipples! Give me my bun, you complete and utter degenerate dick sneeze!" she wails, her nails uselessly scratching down his arm. They leave scrapes and draw pinpricks of blood but the bastard does nothing. The insufferable eight year old just looks her directly in the eyes, smiles his crazy smile, and takes a bite out of his bun. Feeling over-dramatic, she goes limp and starts sniffing. Ryuishi knows it is a little over the top, but the pint sized douchebag has been harassing her all day. She thinks it might also be due to the fact that this is *Zabuza motherfucking Momochi, the guy who kills his entire class* .

(But she's ignoring that. Ignore ignore ignore.)

"I... I made those myself. S-so I could eat them today you f-fucking butt m-munch," she sobs out, looking up at him with big fat crocodile tears in her dark eyes. "They're m-mine..."

"Anything you own is mine," the bigger boy sneers, finishing his stolen food. He burps like a neanderthal, and no, it wasn't kinda impressive, not at all. "Plus you have another one in your bottom pocket, so hurry up and eat."

She manages to let out another fake stream of tears and a sniffle, going for the aforementioned bun. "I took two because one isn't enough to fill me up." Pulling it out and unwrapping it with an unhappy face, she relishes in her lie. She took three, and the last is in the pouch on her hip. She will eat it later, in the shoddy restroom stall, where Zabuza can't get her. The two do nothing but stand there and look imposing as other children try to edge in on their corner. Young they might be, but even Ryuishi understands turf warfare. Their odds for defending the spot increase substantially if there are two of them. To give it up is a sign of weakness, and being the youngest pair in here, the others will tear them apart.

Ryuishi loves children, but she knows that sometimes they can be the most cruel creatures of all.

The day ends with striking practice, which is a clever cover for pairing kids up and letting them beat the shit out of each other. They really don't care too much about style or form, and unless it's Academy Basic, they really don't correct you too much. If it is good enough to take out your opponent, who cares? She finally gets away from the shitty future-swordsman, and after a bathroom break, she proceeds to take out her frustration on an eight year old. The satisfaction she feels when her switchfoot thai kick breaks through his guard and slams into his skull after they had traded jabs for five minutes actually makes her smile. She feels less terrible about her tiny body, and losing both her previous fights. Then she remembers she just beat up an nine year old.

Then she remembers that her body is six, so hah! Take that, morals!

The boy limps away and some turn to examine her more closely, adjusting to the new information. She can see the moment she is moved from the 'ignorable victim' category to the 'competition' slot. It

shows in the hunger in their eyes, through the desire to prove themselves. The Academy fosters this vicious competition, sparing the strongest a few kind words, and they class squabbles among themselves for this position.

She can appreciate the tactic, but still thinks it's wrong.

When the instructor calls an end to the day, Ryuishi is racing out. She is running even though her body is tired and sore. She is running through the classroom, through the hallways, through the streets. Away from the awful tedium that is school, away from the impending second death, away from Zabuza Momochi.

The streets are covered in snow, dirty and brownish in color, soaking up the filth from the ground below. Winters in Kiri are cold, cold enough to freeze the stink from the air and turn the fog into ice. There is frost on the walls and the winding green vines, a shimmering lattice work of crystals over the terrain. Icicles hang from the awnings and overhangs of the vendors and stores, whose yellow lights shine out like beacons in the gloom.

She *hates* the cold. Just like she hates this godforsaken village.

Slowing down, she rubs her hands together and pants in them, hoping her warm breath will take the numbness and ache away. She wasn't bred for this type of weather. Her mom was full blooded Indonesian and her dad came from California for-

Reality strikes hard. Her mom is a whore and her dad probably doesn't know about her. He's also probably a fuckwad. She drops her slightly warmer hands into the depths of her pockets and keeps walking.

Fuckin' reality, always having to be a dick about things.

Her footsteps crunch quietly in the snow, and the feeling of grinding something down is nice. She pauses and take a moment to appreciate it, really stomping down on the stuff. She imagines

Kisame's teacher's smug face under her foot. Fuckin' bastard, fuckin' traitor, grind grind grind. Yeah, that's the stuff...

Then she feels a prickle on the back of her neck, like somebody is plucking the hairs right out of her skin. Instinctively, she pivots to the side and spots the person she wants to see least right now.

"Oh, fuck you," she snarls out, hunching in smaller on herself, shivering. In front of her, the world's smallest, yet greatest, annoyance grins.

"You run fast," Zabuza says.

"Why are you singling me out you asshat?" she moans, dragging a hand across her face. It's official, the world hates her. She wants to be cremated, then sprinkled in the lunches of every kunoichi and shinobi in the village. Maybe, if she becomes a part of them, she can possess their bodies and rule the world. Or maybe she'll turn into poop. Whatever.

"I saw you in the alley that night," the boy says, once again invading her personal space. Ryuishi doesn't even try to stop him, and she has already begun to stop caring about this nonsense. It has nothing to do with how the child puts out heat like a small volcanic eruption. No wonder he was shirtless in the show.

"Oh, really? You'd think that wasn't the very first thing you said to me," she snarks back, trying to not be sucked into the the sweet siren song of warmth.

"I saw you rip someone apart. I can use that."

"Holy shit, you're fucked up in the head, aren't you?" she complains without too much venom. She isn't in the habit of denying herself things. Lying to herself, maybe, but denying, no. She knows that somewhere inside her, a piece of her wants to do it again. That makes them both fucked up.

"I want to see that again," Zabuza finishes, taking a step toward her. He's got that stupid, manic look on his face again. Ryuishi is coming to the understanding that she might have to get used to it. Really, who just pushes themselves on people like this?

(Somewhere, Hoshigaki Kisame shivers. If he ever sees that brat again, he thinks he should hit her.)

"You know what, Zabuza-san?" she queries, apathy flooding her. "Stay away from my hair, and I will accept this." Her life has officially spiraled completely out of control. Why not? Why fucking not make a deal with one whose only wish is to completely control her?

"No deal," he grunts out.

"What? Fucking seriously?" she asks, incredulous.

"I will do whatever I want. You cannot stop me. You're too weak," he states with all the pride an eight year old can muster.

"I'll kick you in the nuts again, if you really want to test me."

Zabuza briefly looks like he forgot that happened at all, even though it occurred less than four hours ago. Then he scowls at her, and drops a hand down to guard his crotch.

"Don't do that," he growls out, attempting at intimidation.

It's too late. It might have worked earlier, but Ryuishi has scared herself straight into not giving a shit by now.

"Don't pull my hair." she pauses for a moment, thinking it through. It won't be weird until puberty, and the way things are going, she'll be long dead before that, so... "Oh, and if I get cold, I get to use you as a heater."

The boy looks confused, but somehow seems to understand that they are haggling something important here. Ryuishi is just a fully

grown adult in a chibi body, arguing about the details of a partnership with a violent eight year old with megalomania. *Perfect* .

"I get some of your lunch every day," he barter back, glaring at her determinedly. "And I will do whatever I want, whenever. When you kill somebody again, you will take me with you."

The girl sighs. His deals sound more like orders. Is she gonna regret doing this?

Probably.

"As long as I can retaliate with force equal to or greater than your attacks, I accept whatever the fuck this is," she says, taking out a frozen hand from her pocket and offering it. So what, she gets to die at the hand of an accomplice. That's not so bad. At least she knows her murderer.

Slowly, as if wary of tricks, he shakes it once and lets go.

She immediately sticks her frigid hand to his ribs and huddles closer. She can't feel her face, and talking so much has let out a good portion of her heat. Her lungs are cold, and she is dying of exposure, so what if she warms herself by using the devil's skin?

AN: I know the dialogue here seems stunted, and that is important to note. Let's discuss some things. Zabuza is a socially unaware eight year old. He also fails to recognize people as people. What he sees in Ryuishi is a tool, not a human being. He wants to use her, control her, make her property. It's not a crush, or friendship, it's owner and slave mentality. He enforces this by physical displays of dominance, like an animal beating down on an unruly member of the pack. This is important to note.

Ryuishi is so stressed, so not in control of her life that she is slipping into hysterical apathy. She's basically going 'Haha, I'm

going to die again, at least I know how and who this time.'

Also, thank you so much for your reviews. They feed me and my writers soul. Another thanks to my beta the Hate Child. Love her, thank her.

Meeting an Epiphany

I do not own Naruto.

From there, things between Ryuishi and Zabuza fall into an uneasy truce. It is not a friendship, not in the least. Rather, it is an unhealthy symbiotic relationship where the two exchange things that the other has use for. It is almost devoid of benign emotions.

Zabuza is almost obsessive in sparking violent outbursts in her, and begins to claim her as a sparring partner on a regular basis. It is brutal, and most of the time ends with her bruised and broken. The beat downs she gets should put a dent in her ego and pride, and they do wound it, but she whines and cries and gets back up. Each time they fight she has to call on a little more viciousness, dip a little further into her ruthlessness. She has to submerge herself in adrenaline and anger to numb the force of the blows he rains down on her. The madder she gets, the more delighted he seems. He's even pleased on the rare occasion she wins in their little duels.

They even begin to meet up after class to beat the shit out of each other. The news of this impromptu training somehow makes its way to his teacher, the current wielder of Kubikiribōcho. He is delighted to learn that his apprentice has made a friend, and wrangles her into training with them. Ryuishi is delighted, because she needs all the help she can get, and receives permission from Keiko and Kagami Okaa-sama to stay out later.

It is Zabuza's sensei that introduces her to the love of her life, the meteor hammer. The long, weighted chain works perfectly with her agility and flexibility, and flows like water. It is a mid-range weapon can be directed and redirected with every limb on her body. Her neck, shoulders, arms, hands, thighs, calves, and feet can all change where the heavy bladed tip ends up. If she catches the chain under her arm she can switch the swing from right to left, and then

back with her calf. It works well with her taijutsu forms, which are unique in the sense that the stance, grab, and strike forms originating from her past life blend with the style taught in the Academy. The only bad thing is that the weapon requires so much practice, and often, she hits herself in the face or groin, or underestimates how much force there is in the swing and sends the length of chain flying in the wrong direction. All in all, at least she doesn't have to face Zabuza with nothing while he attacks her with a giant fucking bokken.

From their truce, the psycho boy also receives a steady supply of food. It had only taken a week for him to wizen up to the fact that she hid snacks on her body near compulsively. It was defensive eating at its finest. Now it seemed anytime he was a little bit peckish, he would simply hold out his hand and grunt, and she would pull food out from her many, many pockets. Or pouches. Or top. Or anywhere, really. It is kind of ridiculous. Most of it was sweets, or portable snacks she cooks at home with the other girls, all individually wrapped. There is always a variety of it stocked on her person. Bao, buns with different fillings, onigiri with almost every filling, tempura, dried fruits, hard candies, suckers, and over sized dumplings lined her person. It's a wonder to behold. She never even smells of the stuff, which is also astounding. Zabuza theorizes that her biggest skill lies within hiding things in plain sight.

Ryuishi on the other hand, gains little that can be actually seen.

She uses the poor boy as a space heater, of course. Winters have always been hard before, but at least then she had the thick, multiple layers of a formal kimono to insulate her small body. Now, however, she cannot do such a thing. It would make training impossible. Instead she has multiples of the same outfit, one that allows for movement and ease of breath. Unfortunately, the loose fabric of her pants is breezy and the shirt is not very warm. So, she trails near Zabuza, soaking in the psychotic child's ambient warmth. When the frost nips at her fingers or sends a wave of goosebumps down her arms, she places the freezing appendages on him. It is not an

uncommon sight to see Zabuza jumping in the middle of class, suddenly assaulted with icy little fingers. Nor is it rare to see the little Ryuishi walking next to him, arms outstretched towards him as if he were a portable campfire.

She isn't sure if the beatings and harassment are worth the heat though.

There is something they share from this little deal, and it takes a while for her to notice it. It doesn't become obvious for a while because she is so wrapped up in training to stay alive. It is only when she goes to ask one of the students next to them a question, and he flinches, does she begin to understand.

The others avoid the duo if they can, shying away from the pair. They rarely meet their eyes, and when they do, their faces are alight with fear and venomous anger. No one encroaches on the little corner they have claimed as their own, even though she sees territory scuffles around them. When they walk alone, their classmates seem to look for the other one of them. They are the youngest in the class, and they should be easy pickings, but nobody seems to try.

Ryuishi thinks about it some, and she can see why they shy away from Zabuza. He exudes an aura of unfriendliness and hostility. His behavior is violent and controlling, and she doesn't think she has ever heard a nice word out of the spiky haired youth. His strength is obvious. He dominates in spars, smashing down opponents three and four years his senior. Every weapon he flings is on target, and he has the most stamina out of all of them, running farther and faster. Zabuza is a prodigy if she has ever seen one, and she can understand their aversion.

But why her?

Ryuishi likes to think she doesn't come off as mean. Maybe a little sarcastic and blunt, but not mean. She isn't a genius in stamina or strength. Maybe she leads the class in agility and flexibility, but those

aren't as obviously off putting as Zabuza's insane power. (She once saw him crush a boulder with his bokken. Like, his wooden bokken. It turned to gravel, and it was upsetting to witness. Never before has she felt so jealous of an eight year old.) Ryuishi, even after weeks, still trails behind on their morning runs. Even after all of her practice, all of her hard work, she can barely hit a target. She may be good at taijutsu, but it is still nowhere near Zabuza's level. The entire situation is baffling.

So, she asks Zabuza, the only one she can ask. He, in turn, grunts and points to the boy she sparred with on the first day.

At first she doesn't see it, but then she squints so she can actually look at his form, instead of a vague, blurry, humanoid shape. (Jesus, she wishes she had some glasses.) He is talking with someone, probably his group of friends. His white hair is smooth, his features happy. She almost doesn't see it. Then, he turns to face forward, calling someone behind them.

His face is a wreck.

He has the faint remnants of a bruise stretching from underneath his hair, to across his cheek, where her kick landed. When he opens his mouth to shout, she can see he is missing a few teeth. His nose is smashed and crooked. She distinctly remembers that Hozuki boy being much prettier.

Then she has an epiphany.

Hozuki.

Clan kid .

She whirls around, looking for the faces of all the opponents she had before the chunin instructors finally caved and partnered her with Zabuza. They are all in similar states of healing. At least half of them are clan kids.

She understands now.

She was an unknown, the youngest in the class, and on her very first day, she beat down somebody who was supposed to be leagues above her by blood alone. She was a nobody, just some spare akasenko. She wasn't an future apprentice to a swordsman like Zabuza. She wasn't from the noble clans like the Hozuki, the Kaguya, or the Yuki children. She should have never won.

How could she win?

Before now, she had never realized what an unfair advantage she has. She has lived an entire life before this one, and it shows, even when she does not want it to. It is a hack, a cheat, an underhanded win. Watanabe Ryuishi has fifteen years of education rather than six months. Watanabe Ryuishi has ten years of mixed martial arts training instead of a single half year or so. Watanabe Ryuishi is twenty six years old, not eight like her classmates. Watanabe Ryuishi has gone through the emotions and whims of childhood once already. She has faced puberty. She has had survival training. She knows what she wants and how to get it. She has done a million things, traveled a thousand places, politicked her way through a bureaucratic world, studied class and cultural differences and human nature itself.

Watanabe Ryuishi is an adult, and they are children. (And yet, she still cannot best Zabuza. That asshole.)

With a huff and a laugh, she leans against the corner and slides down the wall, plopping down boneless next to the demonic boy. She feels like breaking things. She had been so, so sure that she did not stick out. She had never noticed the instructors placing her with progressively harder opponents. She never noticed the children's clan backgrounds. Her social obliviousness has come to haunt her.

She has risen above the others in a noticeable way, and Kiri hates things that stand out. She and the boy next to her will have targets on their backs for the rest of their days in this shitty village.

It is only a few days later that the instructors swap out material and begin a new subject in Ninja Theory.

(She has buried the thoughts of her newest problems with the rest of them, far underneath her conscious mind. She smothers her mind with feigned ignorance and apathy, going through her routine. Wake, morning hygiene and stretches, eat, go to class, train, eat, leave school, train, eat, sleep. It keeps her stable and in control, but Keiko is worried. She tells Ryuishi that she is shouting babble in her sleep, weeping and grinding her teeth. The young girl ignores that too, other than adding meditation to her before bedtime activities.

When she does meditate, she can sometimes see the facets of herself. Each one receives things to tuck away in the corners of her head, and they seem fine with this. Save for one, who is always screaming, always thrashing, always roaring. She ignores that part, but some nights, she thinks it is growing louder.)

They are learning about Chakra today. Ryuishi is ecstatic, practically bouncing up and down on the hard cement bench that is her seat. This is magic, this is laser beams and giant robots! Chakra is not bound to the laws of physics like mere mortals! Chakra is unstoppable! She finally gets a superpower! Oh man, oh man, oh man!

To be honest, she had tried messing around with the stuff before. She had progressed beyond blowing up the walls of the Okiya in desperate attempts to climb them. Now, after two years of practice, she can crawl up dirty alley walls. Most of the time. Using it exhausts her, and not in a physical way. When she pushes her limits it feels like morphine and broken glass is running through her veins. It's painful and awful and it feels like she's dying.

(It feels like floating on the edge of the Void.)

So, she did what the anime advised, and waited for further instructions. Now look at her! The instructors had just explained the

theory behind it.

"Chakra is a mix of Physical and spiritual energies moving through the body blahblahblah pull physical from blood cells blahblahblah train it by training body blahblah Spiritual is pulled from your mind, train it by meditating and shogi and blahblahblah mix in your stomach blahblahblah Keep these water droplets on your forehead!"

Ok, sue her, it wasn't word for word, but the instructor was basically the physical manifestation of a bad fart, so she really didn't pay attention to him anyway. The materials were nearing her seat, a small bottle and an eye dropper. She was excited! Oh man, she couldn't wait to show off! Her ego needed some attention after getting roughed up so bad lately.

Finally she clutched a bottle in her hand, and with one last glance around the room at failing children, she closed her eyes and brought the dropper to her forehead. Letting a single fat drop plop down on her, she focused on her body, letting the colder, more calculating part of her mind take over. With precision she didn't normally have she dredges up part of her spiritual energy and part of her physical energy and mixes them evenly inside her gut before focusing the new mixture on the drop.

It feels like seawater washing through her, cold and briny and alive. The sensation always leaves goose bumps on her skin, and she could almost smell the ocean air. No, it was like fire and warmth, or tangible breezy, freedom. It was hard to describe. The closest thing she could compare it to would be like a shot of your favorite liquor when you're craving it most, but colder. That feeling of your muscles relaxing and your breathing evening out. The taste of something on the back of your tongue. Chakra was just... *amazing* .

The drop on her head holds steady and she puts another on her arm in an attempt to show off her awesome chakra control, but when she looks up at the room, eager for praise, all she finds is fear.

The instructors are wide eyed and shaky, gazing at the seat beside her, and children are running out of the room. With an inquisitive face, she turns to look at the boy sitting beside her.

Zabuza is wreathed in a dark aura that is shaped like hellish figures trying to escape their prison. The mass of darkness around him writhes and almost seems to moan, just below hearing range. It is a wriggling conglomerate of damned souls, all desperate and agonized.

Oh .

Oh yeah!

Zabuza has special chakra, she remembers now! It showed up in the Fourth Shinobi War arc. The very aptly, and not at all creatively named 'demon chakra'. She guesses that no matter how crazy your chakra is, the horrible thing that is death will always top the feelings of misery it brings. Death has kind of numbed her to malice and other people's horrible intentions. She might feel like she's suffocating? Maybe the air is a little heavier? Whatever, there's more important things to think about.

"Hey, Zabuza, look. Two at once," she comments, deadpan. Her little hands are raised to point at the two, very still, very stuck, droplets of water.

The boy slowly turns his head to glare at her, the shivering shroud around him fouling the air. His eyes pierce hers and seem to stare into her very soul, glinting with an unholy light. His mouth is pressed in a thin line, his jaw clenched in concentration. A single, small drop of water is wobbling on the taut skin of his forehead, between his shapely brows.

"Appreciate me, Zabuza. I'm over here, being great, while you party it up in loserville with only one drop. Look, I'll add another." she does, holding the three the drops firmly in place. "See, I'm amazing. My chakra is much more useful than yours."

He grunts something that sounds kind of like a 'No'. The water on his skin slides precariously before freezing.

"Well, at least my chakra never summoned demons from hell," she spits out, pouting. A loud groaning sound fills the air, and the drop on his head slides lower. Ryuishi is smirking, and the chunin look frozen between confusion and disbelief.

"Oh, I'm sorry, am I ruining your concentration, Zabuza-san?" she asks, scooting closer on the bench. The three specks of liquid on her are stone still. "Would it help if I did... this?" she queries, her tiny hand going up to his hair, running through it gently.

Zabuza is stone still, tense under her fingertips.

"How about... THIS?" she shouts, grabbing a fist full of the fluff and yanking on it. The drop on him splashes to the ground and his chakra sputters for a moment, before emerging in greater mass than before. He shouts wordlessly before going for her. She cackles and goes to escape, dodging his first swing and jumping up to clear the table. A hand grips around her ankle and slams her down, and then there is nothing but fists and feet, claws and teeth. Three more drops join Zabuza's on the ground.

"I ORDER YOU TO NEVER DO THAT AGAIN!" he shouts, crushing her forearm in his hand.

"I ORDER YOU TO SUCK MY DICK!" she counters, stomping down on his inner thigh.

The instructors are ignoring them, recovering from the hellish encounter. They decide to round up the other children before splitting them apart.

They are too caught up in mauling each other to care.

AN: Zabuza and Ryuishi antics! Here we see some of their relationship as children, and to be honest, I'm still not pleased with this chapter. I wrote it a while ago but it still seems... rushed I guess. Anyway, if you think that Ryuishi's chakra control is nonsense and Mary sue, please remember that she is an adult who is used to controlling her body and her mind. Also remember that she has been playing around with it off screen for around two years now.

And yes, the introduction of Zabuza's scary chakra! Which is canon, and just sort of existed forever if I understand it right.

Another shout out to the Hate Child for being my lovely beta !

Meeting your Home

I do not own Naruto

Watanabe Ryuishi is seven now.

She is tired, and sore.

Her body is littered with ugly bruises, blooming in shades of blue and yellow and black. They spot her tanned skin, visual reminders of how much better she is getting. It has been months, and her progress has soared higher than she could have conceived when she was training herself alone. Her (very cute) face may be lined with scratches and accented by a swollen, scabbed bottom lip, and she may have had at least three of her baby teeth knocked out, but it is worth it. Her tiny hands are growing hardened with calluses, and her knuckles are dusted with scars, both earned from facing off with Zabuzza multiple times a day. Her shins are hard, the bones beneath her skin conditioned by days spend kicking progressively harder targets. Her once soft arms and thighs are beginning to show the obvious musculature of a fighter.

It has been painstaking, horrible, soul crushing work. Every lazy bone in her body screamed at her to lie down, to take the beatings and go to sleep. Every ounce of vanity had shrieked and bemoaned the fate of their once beautiful and blemish free features. Still, day after day, she got up, went to class, and trained with Zabuzza and his ball busting teacher.

Every single fucking day, she worked with her meteor hammer. She oiled the chain and sharpened the weighted blades, then worked and worked and worked until her strikes hit their targets with devastating effects. She sweated and bled until she could deflect bone fracturing blows with a stretch of linked metal and she cried herself out until she stopped rolling her ankles and could dance across a battlefield.

She can stick to walls and run on water, if only for a short while. Her chakra reserves are small, but just like every muscle in her body and every personality in her mind, she can control it with amazing effectiveness.

She is growing competent.

She can snatch a kunai out of the air, even if she still can't throw them worth a damn. She can turn the movements of her body and inertia of her weapons into damaging strength. She can hike for days, even if she can't run. She can hide in hollows and gutters and houses for hours before being found.

She knows her path will never lead to ninjutsu specialty. Her reserves are too small, and even with the training, she barely scrapes up the normal amount. Chakra practice leaves her especially drained. Zabuza is busting out the Hiding in the Mist jutsu weeks before her, and the amount of fog he creates is massive. He can cover acres with the stuff by the time she can finally fill a hundred square yards. It takes longer for him to learn wall and water walking, but when he does, he can far outlast her. The only thing that he doesn't beat her at is the art of silent killing they are beginning to learn, and that is because most of it is based on memorization.

(Those biology lessons finally came in handy. She knew they would.)

Still, most of their spars end with her lying in a beaten pulp and bleeding out, with him only earning a few bruises. She is exhausted. She is tired and sore. Standing with her class outside of the village walls in front of an endless lake shrouded in mist, she is happy.

Not because she worked, no, fuck that. She's happy because she hasn't swam in fucking ages.

Today the class is learning about another Kirigakure special. The instructors creatively call them Gills. They are small, bronze colored, tubular devices that would have every diver she had met in her past life coming in their wetsuits.

Gills, they explained, allowed for sabotage from underwater. They allowed the user to be submerged for hours at a time, using chakra to filter a mix of hydrogen, oxygen and nitrogen from the water. Light weight and about the size of a compact gas mask, they were a staple of the village. This week they would be taught how to use them, and the dangers of staying underwater too long, or going too deep.

When they separate the class in to two (those who know how to swim, and those who do not), Ryuishi leaps at the chance to head the line of 'knows how'.

In another life, when she had been known as Cat Frank, she had been ridiculous swimmer. As an island bred brat and a beach and mountains child, most of her life had been spent in the liquid embrace of water. It makes her heart ache, to remember years of lessons in the ocean. How to dive beneath a wave to escape its force, how to calm your heart so you can dive deeper, how to surf on a long board. Her father taught her how to read the tide and work with the currents. The water didn't change in either world, and standing so close to even fresh water, she feels like she is coming home for the first time in years. Seriously, she is going to start crying.

She needs this, *now* .

The chunin instructor, that physical incarnation of a fart, smirks grossly at her, expecting her to sink. When she jumps in, and rises as smoothly as a sea snake, he looks disappointed, but hands over a breather with vague instructions of use, and lets her go, focusing on the next child. The water is shockingly cold, and tries to steal her breath away, but she remembers the chill of the pacific, the wild of its waves. She braces herself and breathes deep, measured breaths, letting her already cold skin get used to the temperature.

Ryuishi feels free for the first time in six years.

Even with wet, baggy clothes slowing her down and dragging in the water, anyone watching can tell this is where she belongs. She casts

one last look behind her, sees Zabuza scowling unhappily at her from mid way up the line, flips him off, and slinks underneath the surface.

Sound cuts out, and her already poor sight is limited even further. She can hear the slow and steady *thumpthumpthump* of her heart in her ears, and she wants to sing to the world of her innocent joy. With her free hand she places the cool rubber bit in her mouth, tastes the sharpness of the water, and breathes deep, feet below the surface.

Her hair is a wild whip behind her, hung in suspended animation, and with a quick scissoring motion of her legs, she is off. Her body glides seamlessly in the water, and her aches melt away. Her bruises and cuts don't matter, because the thin light filtering from above is not enough to illuminate her. She reaches a hand up, pinches her nose, and blows hard against the blockage. Her ears pop and the pressure evens out inside her head. Ready now, she dives down into the inviting darkness, arms outstretched in front of her.

Her body is streamlined, smooth and ready to twist and turn at the slightest motion. The inky depths embrace her, and she makes sure to stay in the safe zone of anywhere from fifteen to twenty five feet. Any deeper and she risks getting a case of the bends if she rises too fast. With alternating kicks of her feet, she eats up distance, testing her limits. With each rippling undulation of her body, she descends.

Her heart is slow and steady, despite the activity, her breath still measured in seconds. (Seven in, hold four, seven out.)

Suddenly, she is Cat Frank again.

She is Cat Frank, and she is four, and her father is holding her strong and showing her how to angle her body and stand against the waves.

She is Cat Frank, and she is five, and her mother is teaching her how to dance across river stones without splash.

She is six and her brothers and her are wrestling in the lake, a newborn safe on the shore.

She is eight and her family is plucking fish from the water on bottles wrapped in string. She teaches a toddler how to swim, like her father and mother taught her.

She is ten, and she is cliff diving for the first time.

She is fourteen, and she can catch catfish with her bare hands, and knows the best spots to swim and fish and boat.

She is eighteen, and her and her best friend are laughing, clutching to a buoy in the middle of a humongous summer storm. Lightning strikes the water a mile away and they cheer.

She is nineteen and she looks out at the warm gulf coast, and she loves it too. The waters call to her and soothe her stressed heart.

She is twenty, and everyone she loves is sunbathing on the bluffs, the water lapping against the stones.

Her heart is screaming, and she knows there are tears in her eyes, but she is finally, finally home. Ryuishi is where she was born to be, tight in the water's hold. Her veins are rivers, thrumming beneath her skin, and her heart is a sea, urging her on.

She wants to sing, to shout. Her soul feels warm, and she *lovse/loves/loves* so very much the water and the memories it holds. She hits the soft, silty bottom.

She turns around, facing the surface from below, and prepares. She removes her Gills and places them in her pocket. Her body is slick, and her legs suddenly lose their leisurely pace, kicking off with a purpose, and then furiously propelling her forward. The water rushes past, and even with clothes dragging her back, she is faster than ever before. Her heart thumps and her head hurts from the drastic change in pressure.

Ryuishi bursts out from the water and into the air, twisting through the sky, and lets out a cry of pure joy.

For a moment, she can see the others piddling around, like newborn ducks. The instructors are waist deep, one in front of a group who seem lost in the liquid, another watching a the spaced out group with Gills in their mouth, tentatively hiding beneath the surface.

(They see her, and it seems to them that they have never seen her before now. Like how a bird looks so different in flight. The chunin notes that they haven't had that sort of talent in water since Kisame Hoshigaki was in class. The Hozuki child thinks she would not be out of place among his clan. Zabuza thinks that there isn't just a monster hidden inside the girl, but a sea krait as well.)

Later that week, they introduce underwater combat. The lake is covered in floating platforms, and many of the children can already stand on its placid surface. In Kiri, water walking is the equivalent of tree jumping. It is taught young, and is almost essential to shinobi life. They practice for the last two days in an all out battle royale, and occasionally the instructors jump in as well. It is a jutsu and weapons filled free-for-all. The only rules are no killing and no injuries that will last for more than two months.

Zabuza holds a whole section of it by himself with his bokken, ruthlessly taking out groups of attackers, and smashing his way through the ones on the surface, gaining ground like crazy. Most kids are on top of the water as well, only popping in the liquid to gain a surprise angle to their attacks.

Three people do the exact opposite.

One is the Hozuki child, who is getting better and better with his clan's blood line limit. He slips and slides around the upper part of the lake, dodging attacks and holding his opponents under until they surrender, occasionally using his Ninjato.

Another is one of the chunin instructors, who watches and strikes at any student who he believes isn't putting enough effort into the fight. He leaves them with bruises and gashes as warnings, taking a delight in drowning the much smaller figures, before heaving them up on shore to vomit out liters of water, marked by their teachers fists and kunai.

The last is Ryuishi, who utilizes every tool she has. She grabs ankles, interrupting other fights, and pulls them into her world. She uses their sluggish reflexes against them, the water slowing their strikes and cushioning their blows. She wraps them tight in her holds, squeezing until trails of bubbles leave their mouths. She jumps out from below to land surprise strikes with her meteor hammer, tumbling entire groups into the lake before she falls back into the water. She takes them down one by one as they struggle in her chains, a song in her heart and a set of Gills in her mouth.

In the end, the instructor leaves and it becomes a three way fight between the Hozuki, her, and Zabuzza. The air is thickened with multiple Hiding in the Mist jutsu, and Zabuzza has a hard time finding the other two as they struggle against each other under the water's surface. Eventually a body flies upward from the force of an unseen blow, followed by a chain. An extra strike to it makes sure it stays down, and with his free hand, Zabuzza yanks as hard as he can on the clanking metal. Ryuishi flies out of the water, still holding onto the middle of it, and arcs through the air above him while sending down the other bladed end at him with her foot. She laughs, loud and bright and clear, the happiest he has ever seen her, the Gills tumbling out of her mouth. (They are quickly caught and stuffed in a pocket.) Her long hair is trailing loose behind her, tangled and made wild by the activity of the day, her eyes bright and shining.

He knocks the end away, and she splashes back down, swimming below him. He pulls her up again and again, ignoring how tangled he is becoming in the heavy metal as he stands on the waters surface, surrounded by tainted chakra. Eventually, his ignorance is what does him in, and she offsets his balance as they loop around his legs. Tied

down and sinking fast, he struggles, but the water is her home, her life, and she gains a win, one of those rare victories that seems to always elude her when it comes to him.

The last thing Zabuzza sees is her smiling face, illuminated by the soft rays that filter through the water and her billowing cloud of hair as she chokes the air out of him.

That week is the happiest Ryuishi can ever remember having in Kirigakure. The joy does not last.

The week that comes after the last of January, and the fresh love of her family is still there. It aches and it bleeds inside of her, but it is tinged with the joy they once shared.

Ryuishi goes to bed every night, and after she meditates, she closes her eyes and remembers every detail that she can. She has been doing this since she was born. Sometimes, it is hard to recall the sound of her brother's voice, and the first time she lost it, even after all that happened between them, she cried. She wept hot, bitter tears and, furious at herself, she tried to recall every name he called her, every childhood torment and every special occasion that they finally admitted they loved each other.

She can't remember her pets anymore, or her high school locker combination, or her first college class. She can't remember what her old room looked like, or the names of her old bosses. It scares her.

What she does recall is the sound of their laughter, the shapes of their faces, the tones of their voices. She remembers long and hard, every night, desperately clinging on to them. She recites their hobbies and histories over and over again inside her head like a twisted lullaby until she falls asleep. She cannot draw well, but she keeps trying and trying, hungry to see them again after so long, and hundred of papers full of the same faces with minor differences have filled the Okiya at one time or another.

In the brothel kitchens, she cooks the recipes her mother and father taught her, and the working girls delight in her creativity. In survival practice, she ties her hooks and guts her kills just like her dad showed her, and the instructors comment on her skill. When she hums, it is her brother's favorite songs, her mother's favorite hymns, and her father's old rock music, and Keiko tells her she should have been a musician instead of a kunoichi.

She remembers them every single day of her life. Almost every little habit or tidbit she does is them shining through, the family that she cannot reach. And on January Thirtieth, the day of her sister's birthday, she disappears. This year is harder, with memories playing so loudly in her head. She tells everyone she is going to play, or train.

People can follow her, if they want. Maybe somebody trails her, but she knows her actions will make no sense to them. There is no sackcloth in this world, but there is a sort of burlap. She steals ashes from the oven. She writes a note in secrecy, in a language that no one here understands and then she folds a tiny paper boat from it.

She wanders slowly, thinking the whole time, before coming to the cleanest creek in all of Kiri. It is the river in the trade district, the one that funnels supplies in and out of the island.

There she finds a secluded place and places the old burlap sack around her shoulders, and using the water as a mirror, she dusts her face with ashes. The patterns swirl and twist, mimics of a tribe that is only just being born in this world mixing with a religion that never existed here. Then, dressed in sackcloth and painted in ash, she sets the boat in the water and cries, long and hard as the little paper ship floats away.

Her dad told her once that all rivers melt into the sea, and that every ocean connects. Ryuishi knows that wherever they are, they are near water.

She prays that her little ships find them.

An: YAY! No dialouge, but more story! Here we see the introduction of one of a Ryuishi trademark move. And more fun stuff between the two. Thank you for the reviews and favorites and follows!

Also, It was brought to my attention that my Indonesian grammar needs work back in chapter 6. I am sorry. I did not grow on the islands, only with an immigrant mother who curses at me in a foreign language.

Meeting your Mistake

I do not own Naruto. Triggers for gore.

The rice is sticky and is refusing to come off her hand. It is lunch time, and she is currently munching on a lemper roll. The flavor of spicy chiles and curry-like chicken dances across her palate, and when mixed with the glutinous rice it becomes more than delicious. Unfortunately, the extra glutinous rice makes it harder to eat, because the little grains stick to fucking everything.

Ryuishi thinks that if they could harness the stickiness of rice, the world might not have use for chakra.

She swallows the last bite of her roll and relishes in the feeling of abated hunger. Sure, she has two more rolls left, but they're Zabuza's share, and she stuffed them with extra chiles this morning, just for him. Not that he likes spicy food or anything, she just likes seeing the kid cough and sweat with the heat.

She picks a kunai out of her pouch and delicately runs the sharp blade down her flattened palm. It shaves the little grains away, and she smiles as she wipes the residue off her palms and onto her pants. Maybe she can't throw them worth a damn, but they sure had other uses.

Hands now clean, she stows the tool back on her hip and leans back in the corner, waiting for the other child to show up. He usually pisses right before lunch, and woah, she knows this boy's habits way too well. Gross, regret, apathy.

They had been training together for a little over a year now, and she has never felt stronger. She finally mastered the Hiding in the Mist jutsu, and can even cast slight genjutsu, but her taijutsu and bukiyutsu are still her best selling points. The school term is coming

to a close, and winter break will probably be full of even more training. She can do it.

She smiles to herself with pride as she sees the spiky haired boy make his way over to their spot. The crowds part for him, splitting on either side like water in front of a boat. His scowl is hidden behind the iconic bandages wrapped around his face. Funnily enough, the boy had only started wearing them after their week long lesson on gaseous poisons. He had tried the standard issue gas mask, but the devices were well beyond their non existent pay. The chunin instructor, in a fit of pity or madness (or both), had suggested cloth. It would lessen the effectiveness of poison gas, but in no way would prevent toxins from entering his body. Ryuishi had told him it was probably for the best, because he looked like he was going to a rave instead of participating in a battle. This had devolved into a fifteen minute explanation of what a rave was. After Zabuza had grunted and told her he knew what she was talking about, she had the startling realization that those things existed in the Naruto world.

They were called 'reibu', and one day she was going to one.

The spiky haired boy scowls at her smirking face and crouches down across from her, silently holding out his hand for his share. She hands the rolls over, surreptitiously anticipating the fun. Ever the gentleman, he grunts out his appreciation-or, whatever? He grunted a lot-and bites into his food. She lets a foxy grin stretch over her face, and he notices immediately. Exactly like the times before, his pale complexion floods red and he chokes, spitting half chewed bits of food from his mouth which falls all over his sitting form. Impressively enough, some even land on her pants.

But unlike all the times before, Zabuza flies into a fit of rage.

He pops up with a snarl full of unthinking fury and lashes out before she can stop him. His powerful fist rushes out and smashes into her jaw, forcing her head to bash against the stone wall behind her. A tight, high gasp of pain escapes her lips, and she see stars. She can

feel her body slump down, and the sound of ringing fills her ears. Her thoughts jumble and her vision grows watery.

What the *fuck* ?

Sure, she and Zabuza had traded blows like this before, but never so unprovoked. It was usually during sparring or wrestling. The last time he ate food she messed with, he had just pinned her and sat on her the rest of the day, allowing the other children to laugh at her. It had been forgotten the next day. The time before that, he had slathered mud into her hair.

Looking up at the boy with blurry vision, his fist still raised toward her and his eyes full of violence, she doesn't understand. He was nine now, and nine year olds could take a joke, right?

Nine... he was nine, why did that set off alarm bells inside her head?

Ryuishi raises a calm hand to the back of her head, his eyes tracking her movement the whole way. Her fingers dig through the strands of her hair and press into something warm and wet. When she holds them in front of her face, they are stained red.

The little rat bastard split her head open over spicy food!

Her gaze finally meets his, and he lingers for a moment on her bloody fingertips before meeting her stare. He looks like he has calmed down a bit, but not much.

"Zabuza," she croaks out, gesturing at him, "What the shit man?"

He glares at her once again before throwing the remains of his lempu roll at her feet and stalking off. He doesn't return to class for the rest of the day.

That night, Ryuishi walks home alone for the first time in months. Her head is full of thoughts of her companion, and his demeanor lately. The pint-sized prick has been moodier, his emotions swinging on an

out of control pendulum that she can't read. She can't understand it, and it is beginning to worry her.

Something itches in the back of her head, and it seems like she is forgetting something.

Zabuza and her were never supposed to meet, but she has little to no control over these things. At first, she played along with his game because of the benefits it brought her. She got instruction from a strong teacher, a reliable sparring partner, and somebody to while away time with. Now... now Zabuza feels less like a trial she has to pass in order to gain things and more like...

She doesn't know. If she was actually seven years old, the boy might have seemed like an older brother figure, but she isn't a child.

He doesn't seem to drag out her maternal instincts in anyway, or her protective older sibling streak at all. He is mature and ambitious, and their personalities may prick each other, but when it comes down to it they mesh surprisingly well. They share food and joke together. They spend an inordinate amount of time training as well. Without him by her side, she wouldn't socialize with anybody. He is both as mature as her and he lets her joke and play.

He almost can count as... as an equal.

She mulls on that for a while as she settles into her nightly routine, then tries to figure out the secret of his sour moods. When she wakes up in the morning, she is still sure she is forgetting something.

She bathes and dresses, and fixing her long hair she tries to think about something else. She fills her pouches and oils her weapon before wrapping it around her waist. She goes through her stretches and eats her breakfast.

Is he worried about them splitting up for the winter? Nah, he wouldn't care about that. Anyway, the younger classes are going on for a few

weeks more, it's only the oldest class's turn to graduate today, so what does it matter?

Graduate .

Zabuza is nine.

Panic fills her heart, and it feels like somebody is choking her out. She bonelessly drops her bowl of rice and it shatters on the ground below her. Keiko calls her name, but she is frantic and terrified as she scrambles out the brothel, splintering the door in her haste.

She wants to vomit. She wants to cry. *How could she forget ?*

She is flying down the empty early morning streets, her feet pounding on the ground.

No, no, nonono. *Children* . They were all children! Just little tiny brats who should be in middle school, whinging about homework and strict parents. They should be riding the bus, worried about fashion and sexuality and what was for lunch. They couldn't be, no, they had such full lives ahead of them, even if they were child soldiers.

She wants to kick her own ass.

Her baby sister's face flutters through her mind, all shining and happy. They are just like her! They are kids, dammit, *kids* ! They needed adults and love and warm, safe places, and she has been trying so hard to give it to them!

She prays hard, harder than she can remember for a long time. She isn't fast, and it is killing her. Her sandaled feet slip in the slick, fog laden streets and she trips, scraping her arm as she does. She ignores the blood and her dirty clothes as she climbs back up and continues her pace, wishing her brothel was closer to the school.

Her gut is heavy in her abdomen, and her breath is coming in gasps. She can't breathe, she *can't fucking breathe* ! She thinks the stress

is getting dangerously high, but she can't seem to care. There are children waiting, children, *just children*... She knows it's not healthy to keep equating them to her sister, but she can't stop.

She runs deliriously through the mist, coming closer to the Academy, where they will be. Something moves like snakes underneath her skin and it feels hollow and empty, like a part of her is floating away in the dark. She can see the cracked, domed roofs lined with vines, and her side hurts from running so far, but she keeps pushing until she is in front of the doors, shoving her way through them.

The silence inside the building is deafening, and she lets out a sob that echoes around her. The light of dawn is just breaking through, and the halls are filled with the sound of her panting for breath. She takes an unsteady step forward, blood rushing in her ears.

Then another.

Then another.

Her heart flutters wildly in her chest, and she practically suffocates with dread. The corridor stretches out forever in front of her, the bare bulbs casting their yellowed light on the decrepit walls. Her hands are shaking. The sound of her sandals meeting the concrete floor is empty and muted.

She doesn't want to know.

She has to know.

She keeps walking.

Ryuishi stares at the approaching door, and remembers her first day here, when she thought that it was the only whole, unbroken thing in the building. She remembers knowing the first day here what would happen.

How could she forget? How could she be so dumb?

The door stands ominous and frightening before her, and a trembling hand reaches out to open the upper years classroom. It opens quietly, without a squeal.

Ryuishi walks in, and wants to cry harder. There are bodies strewn all over the gymnasium building. They are broken and bleeding and so, so small and *deaddeaddead*. There, in the corner, is the Hozuki child she competed with at the lake, his eyes wide and glassy, his trachea poking out from the soft red meat of his neck. There is the girl who sometimes painted her nails in class, only she has no hands, just mangled stumps with skinless strings of flesh and tendons poking through. Her vein dangles out of her wrist like the worms that will soon eat her corpse. The Kaguya boy who was two years ahead of them and looked down at them with scorn is motionless. His white bones are pierced through his own gut, his bowels spilling out like snakes, ripening the air with the smell of feces and bile.

They stare, empty eyes and mangled bodies, and they whisper to her.

You did this, you let him do this.

They were babies, just little kids. She... she failed them.

She looks out at them, and her baby sister looks back at her.

That nothingness inside her squirms and shivers, and she still cannot name it, but it burns through her, buried under sorrow. Her strangled sob fills the air.

In the center of the room, covered in filth, Zabuza looks up at her and growls. Tears pour down her face, and she looks at him, sobbing, and anger begins to bloom inside of her.

"Monster," she whispers, her hands going to her weapon.

He slides into a stance, and raises his blade. Not his bokken, his blade. The sword he used to cut down every little one in this room. The tachi he used to *murder children* .

The rain inside her soul turns to thunder, and the winds pick up. Blood howls in her veins and an ocean rises up inside of her, indignant and heartbroken. Fat, wet tears slide down her face and sting her swollen eyes. Rage wells within her, crying out for retribution. She is shaking, and she doesn't feel like herself. This isn't her body anymore.

Ryuishi locks eyes with him, and *screams* . She screams with her broken voice, like she did the night she ruined it forever. The sound rips through the quiet, a shriek of pain and hate, carrying everything inside of her. She can't think, she can't breathe, she is looking through a lens at the scene.

Zabuza answers with a roar of his own, and she can feel the violence of it in her bones.

She darts forward, and she feels from far away how much she wants to tear him apart, how betrayed by his actions she is. How could she, how could she forget what a demon he was? Her meteor hammer is cold and slick in her hands, and she swings it forward, the bladed end tearing through the air towards the boy she had spent a year together with. The boy that ate her food and pulled her hair. The thing that killed a hundred children.

He angles his sword, catching the chain, and the metal links wrap tight around it, even as they rush toward each other over the lifeless forms of their school mates. He plants a foot inside the torn up torso of a girl, *just a little girl*, and slashes it down, and the chain falls to the ground. Then the other end is rushing towards him, heavy and sharp as it cuts through the gloom. He flings a kunai and knocks it off course, but the other end is already moving again, arcing up from the ground and cutting through his pants and the tender flesh of his thigh.

He roars again, and the approaching girl howls back.

This is so, so fucked up. They were all children. They were so young, at the oldest, twelve, and now their broken bodies lay over the ground like lifeless dolls. She is so angry. What kind of people make children kill each other? What kind of bastard is Zabuzza?

She is approaching faster, not thinking about the distance advantage her weapon has, only thinking about how much she wants to break the beast in front of her. She wants to feel the demon's insides with her hands and taste his heart as she crushes it in her jaws. A group of wickedly sharp kunai sail through the air and she lashes out an arm, fist curled tight around metal. The chain responds to her like an extra limb and sweeps away from her target, the links knocking the knives from the air. She follows through, twisting like a whirlpool and catching the beginning of the other half with her the back of her right ankle and kicking it towards him, the length of metal sliding over her leg. She hears the sound of ringing metal from somewhere far away inside her head.

Then the two forces meet, and his sword is falling fast, as if to cut her in half. Her right foot finally plants itself and the other is already sweeping back up, the back of her calf smashing into his forearms and redirecting the blow to her side, his powerful arms moving again. The blade turns in his grasp, and sweeps from below, towards her hip, but her feet leave the floor altogether. Her left leg arcs above his head and her hand shoots out, dropping part of the meteor hammer and tangling itself in his hair and pulling hard to pull herself up. She wishes she could grind his face into the ground.

His two hands still hold the blade and are lifting it higher, arms straight out, but her torso dives in the gap it creates near his chest and her left leg lands on his shoulder just as her right slides down to the opposite side. Her ankles lock and her knees press tight as her thighs choke him. The momentum of her swinging weight causes him to slip in a pool of coagulating blood and fall on his ass, her chain falling around them.

They are on the ground, grappling amongst the the dead, and fury courses through her veins. What fucked up kind of situation is this? How could she have been *so fucking stupid* ? She should have saved them, fuck, dammit. The shitty exams should have never existed in the first place!

One of Zabuza's arms lets go of the blade and wraps tight around her long, high ponytail. She can hear a grunt, and can tell the barbed wire inside of it has pierced his callused palm, but he still manages to yank her head back, exposing her neck to his sharp, quickly advancing tachi. She moves with his pull, arching her back and planting her hands, the fist full of chain landing in blood, the other on the shredded leg of a dead child. Her hold loosens and Zabuza slips out, gasping as he slides forward. His need for air feeds something dark inside of Ryuishi.

Her legs swing upward from the impromptu backbend and point to the ceiling, intent on turning it into an impromptu back hand spring, but Ryuishi is not quick enough. A hot line stretches across her lower back, from her right hip down to her left thigh.

She cries out and the acrobatics move falters. Somewhere inside, far away, part of her thinks she deserves it. That she deserves more than a single slash.

(*The carcasses of children watch her, accusation in their blank, glassy eyes.*)

Instead of a clean plant, her feet tumble to the ground and she is left on all fours, Zabuza already advancing, jabbing his blade at her. She snarls, filled with grief, and pushes off from something slick and yielding with her legs, driving herself underneath his attack, tackling him and driving her shoulder into his gut. He slides back and a pommel arcs toward her head, but she is sliding around, her head now near the base of his spine. Her free hand is scrabbling on his thigh, and the one fisted around her weapon is full of sliding chain links, waiting for a bladed end.

His hand reaches around and finds her head just as her hand finds the gash on his thigh, and they both attempt to maim as much as possible. Zabuza tries to pull her forward by her hair again, ignoring how the barbed wire is ruining his palms, but she simply sinks her teeth into the blood soaked skin of his lower back, desperate to wound him and just so *angry*. Her fingers pull at the edge of his leg wound, and her hand slips, her nails gouging out bits of flesh. He roars and she feels the sloppy jerk of his body, and a sharp, intense pain in her lower leg that fills her entire being. He has pinned her right calf to the ground with his sword.

She shrieks with a full mouth and attempts to rip the muscle off his bone with her teeth and hand like a hyena on a carcass. Her other hand finally grasps the blade at the end of her chain and she plunges it into the part of his back that is by her head, aiming for his kidney.

She can't stop thinking about how fucked up this all is. How much she wishes it wasn't happening. How angry and hurt she is, how everyone is *deaddeaddead* and it is all her fault.

Zabuza stumbles forward, and she finally succeeds in ripping a part of flesh off in her mouth. Her hand is torn away from his leg, crushed in a much stronger grasp before it is flung away. The boy whirls to face her, a blade still in his back, trailing chains. She spits the chunk of him in his face. In retaliation he tears the tachi out of her leg and she wails, loud and sharp, as the agony fills her.

Ryuishi *hates* him.

She pulls the chain in her hand, and the weighted blade in his back falls free, and he echoes the sound falling to his knees not a foot away. They both lock eyes again, and in that moment she thinks she has never wanted to hurt someone more and not at all at the same time.

They lunge at the same time. His fist smashes into her face, and hers smashes into his groin, and they both tumble to opposite sides.

Ryuishi rolls till she slams into something soft and lukewarm. Her eyes are shut from the blow and she is distantly aware that her body is in humongous amounts of pain. She is far away, and she knows that she's going to bleed out, but Zabuza took her knife to the kidney and wouldn't last long either.

She doesn't want to get up. She wants to cry for a century, and smash Kiri to the ground. She wants to end the life of every man and woman that allowed this to go on. She wants to wail and scream and hurt everybody who hurt her. But... but..

She has to make sure. She needs... she needs to see.

She needs to finish this.

When she opens her eyes, they are looking into the swollen, blank gaze of a little boy who is missing the lower half of his face. His tongue lolls out, hanging down his ruined cheek and touching the crimson covered floor. She chokes on another gross sob and lets the storm inside her heart fuel her, letting rage and grief power her shaking arms as she pushes herself up. Getting to her legs is even harder, and they beg her not to move, but a hundred pairs of dead little eyes stare accusingly at her, and she cannot ignore them.

Her eyes lock on Zabuza's huffing form twenty feet away, and she stumbles across the carnage. Halfway there, she bends to pick up the sharp end of her weapon, listening to the ghostly rattles of the chain that trails behind her as she doggedly drags it with her. The fallen form draws nearer, until she is standing over him, his determined eyes glaring up at her crying face.

He looks so small, she thinks. So small and pale . He is shivering in the cold room like he never has before. She belatedly realizes that its the blood loss. Funny, she thinks, that his blood blends just fine with everyone else's. That his body is just as small as the rest of them.

And then it hits her, and the rage flees her body. Shame takes its place.

Zabuza *is* small. Zabuza is just a child, a mentally ill child. He was never taught any better. In fact, Kirigakure directly encouraged him to do this, to be violent and bloodthirsty and cruel. He was never told his aggression was too much. Nobody ever explained why the other kids didn't work like him, didn't think like him. He never got encouragement unless he earned it through violence or bloodshed.

It was she who should have known better. The moods, the violent outburst, the disregard for others. Zabuza was a textbook case of Antisocial Personality Disorder, and she should have seen it a mile away. She should have helped him, found another way. She was a grown woman, and she was too busy playing around to realize that *Zabuza was a child who needed help*, not an adult.

She sinks to her knees, and the chain clatters to the floor. If she dies here and now, she deserves it. She could have, should have, will be better. The children who lay dead around her deserved better. The boy in front of her deserves better. Better than Kiri and bloody graduation exams.

Better than her.

Ryuishi hiccups, and swallows, her hand sweeping up her face to wipe the tears and blood of her face. She only succeeds in smearing it around, and her nose is dripping. The wet drops that fell from her eyes like rain turn into a river. The little boy in front of her is pale and sweaty, but he looks shocked.

"I'm sorry," she rasps out. Zabuza looks like has never been more confounded in his life.

(*He is just a little boy .*)

"I should have helped you," she whispers, and she can see confusion in Zabuza's eyes. He doesn't understand. He doesn't get

that she is sorry, so sorry. He doesn't know that what he has done is unforgivable, that his actions are monstrous. Violence and slaughter are the only thing Kiri has ever taught him.

He allows her trembling hand to reach out and clasp his shoulders, and the adrenaline and rage is running out. All she can feel is guilt and grief, and she can't stop crying. She feels weak and faint, and her body hurts *so much*. He is sitting up, and she can feel herself swaying where she sits. The broken bones of innocents surround them, and their cadavers condemn her. She should have been better. Zabuza was never a monster. He was just another little boy, another victim of the Bloody Mist's twisted designs.

"I-I should h-have been here," she whimpers, and Zabuza is reaching a hand out, and she is falling forward. She collapses into his chest, his slow and labored breaths filling her ears.

She weeps into the boy's bloodied skin, full of mourning and grief, mumbling apologies over and over again. He wraps his arm around her, and together they stand up in a graveyard full of children's remains.

"I'm sorry," she whispers again. Sorry she lost herself. Sorry that she forgot. Sorry she couldn't run faster. Sorry she didn't read the signs. Sorry she never taught him how to communicate. Sorry that she failed to save a single life, make a single change. Sorry she wasn't strong enough. Sorry her own mind was broken into pieces.

Sorry that in the end, they are both just fucked up people.

Shinobi converge on them not long after, and though they are shocked and frightened, they are also impressed. He can see the two chunin who instruct their class watching them with knowing eyes. He can barely hear 'Demon' being said, because he is too tired and too in pain.

Zabuza holds Ryuishi steady with bloody, torn hands while simultaneously using her as a crutch. The adults surround them, and more are traipsing through the door, carefully checking the bodies surrounding them for any sign of life.

He is sure there will be none. The only one who survived his wrath is in his arms.

He knew, somewhere, there had been teachers watching, evaluating. They were originally there for the graduate fights, but he had made them evaluate him instead. He had made them watch as he cut down those older than him, those who supposedly had more skill. His opponents had been nothing but jokes, and he took their lives without remorse. He was mad, mad that they would be seen as better tools. Mad that they would be seen as his betters, and he had set out to prove just how good he was. There wasn't a thought in his mind about what it would mean later. The only thought that filled him was the thought of proving himself. He would take them all on, not just a one on one fight, but rather all at once. That would show them how much better he was, how much more deserving. And he had succeeded.

He had shown the instructors how good he was with every stroke of his sword and every liter of blood he spilled. Every one he killed was another reason for them to watch him, to look at him. See how good he was? See how much control he had? He was ready for the next step, not these other chumps. Then she had come, and the watchers got to see a real fight.

He didn't understand what had made her so angry, he only knew she was. After the pathetic show the others had given him, he was more than ready to face her. Only...

When he looked up, she had been crying. She had looked over the bodies of the useless, weak tools that surrounded them, and wept bitter tears. She had screamed with such ferocity, such sorrow, it had stunned him. He had answered in kind, feeling the need to respond. It had been awesome, a clash of forces. Zabuza had been excited,

because he could feel her killing intent permeate the air, and he had felt it mingle with his own demonic chakra. Together, they had resonated. They had found harmony in death and destruction. He had never before fought her like this.

It had been intense. She would hold nothing back, and he had realized it the moment they had bellowed together. It had been a song that filled his ears in that moment. He was sure one of them would lie dead before the sun hit its peak.

Ryuishi had cut his leg deep, and it would scar. He would wear that mark for the rest of his life, just like the one on his back. She had been an animal, using tooth and claw to wound him. As slippery as a snake, she had closed the distance and diminished the power of his blows. She moved like water and struck him to the ground, not once, but twice, unafraid to take cheap shots that might have seemed unhonorable. He had returned the favor, and he was sure that the deep slash that ran down her hip, over her buttock to the opposite leg would mark her forever as his tool. The one he would shine brightest with, the one that would help him show the world his true strength.

It had been a fierce fight, and he had been glad. When he had taken the stab to the kidney and then the bite and then the final dirty shot to the manhood, he had been pleased. If he died, it would be worth it. Ryuishi had finally shed her liar's skin and shown him what he wanted to see. When she stood over him, her face screwed up and ugly with tears, blade in hand, he had been ready for one last struggle.

He had not been prepared for apologies.

Her whispered words had been so unexpected it shook him from his bloodlust like nothing had ever done before. He just couldn't understand! Why was she crying? Why was she upset? Why wasn't she killing him? Why did she reach out and touch him without pain?

(Could she see him?)

Then she had collapsed and he had instinctively gone to catch her, like all times he had in sparring sessions. He had held her, awkward and confused while she cried. Ryuishi, the girl who had been so close to killing him, the boy who took out every child in the school, had cried. Crying was against the shinobi rules, but she had done it all the way through the fight and still kept up with him, still came inches away from ending him. She was still hiding her face in his shoulder. He had seen the monster from the alley while they fought, and he had held it in his in his arms as it wept.

Looking down at the girl at his side, he still does not understand, but he feels....warm.

He doesn't know what she meant when she said she should have helped him. He knows that it wasn't about the massacre, knows that somehow the sight of their dead classmates wounded her. He is still wondering why she apologized.

But... the words are still... something.

Nice? Maybe. He doesn't know.

Zabuza thinks on it while they are rushed to a hospital. He doesn't know what the words are for, or what they are meant to do. He doesn't understand her. He doesn't understand how she can be a monster in a little girl's skin, and then a little girl wearing a monster's skin. He doesn't get why she laughs or feeds him spicy food if it gets her hurt or why she constantly provokes him.

He didn't think it mattered. Now he wants to know.

His eyelids are heavy and he feels tired, even before the anesthetic sets in and the warmth of Iyoro ninjutsu settles over his back. His tool is laying across from him, a group hovered over her calf, shying away and mumbling together. They will fix his tool, he knows. They will mend that cracks he has given her.

It is the last thing he sees before unconsciousness takes him.

AN:So Massacre. What we learn here is that Ryuishi is awful at remembering details, and has a thing for kids. We also learn that she is shite when it comes to dealing with stress. And the author needs to work on writing fight scenes.

It is also important to note that Zabuza is mentally ill. Like, textbook mentally ill. It does not excuse his actions, rather explains them. What excuses them to an extent is that he is nine and raised in a fucked up culture.

Other stuff... uhm, sorry for the rough start. As always, a big shout out to my beta, the hate child, and the warning that when it rains, it pours, especially in Kiri!

Meeting the Aftermath

I do not own Naruto.

Watanabe Ryuishi wakes up with a screech in her throat and a half forgotten night terror still playing out in her mind.

There are broken bodies lying shattered on the cold concrete ground. The air smells like blood, bile, feces, and tears. There must be a hundred bodies, but they all have the same two faces. One is Zabuza's, another is a sister who isn't in this world . "You should have known, you should be better. You let this happen." The Void, empty and eternal, nothingness stretching out forever.

Her mouth is dry and sour, like she threw up in her sleep, and the bed beneath her doesn't feel like the hard futon in her half of the room at the Okiya. She feels out of breath, and shoves all thoughts down somewhere deep inside her. She doesn't want to think. She hasn't forgotten her failure.

Her coal black eyes gaze curiously around her new surroundings. It seems like a generic hospital room.

She died in a room that looked like this, once.

The thought startles her into waking up a bit more. She is disjointed and groggy in the mornings, even more so in unfamiliar surroundings. Her back feels stiff and her calf is sore. The hospital has that clean, stuffy smell that seems generic to all health care facilities. The bed is soft, even if the blankets are thin and the pillow is plastic. Her hair is loose around her and she is lying flat on her back. The bright fluorescent lights are so different than she has seen around the buildings in Kiri, so much brighter, that they make the room seem alien.

Like... it belongs in her old world.

She pushes those thoughts down and shoves them in with the others, the ones full of failure and dead children. She doesn't have an outlet at the moment, and though she knows it is unhealthy, bottling it up is all she can do for now.

She breathes in deep, a long, drawn out inhale that fills her lungs to the point of painful. She holds it.

She wants to get so drunk, she is still intoxicated the next day and she can't remember the night before. She wants to fuck somebody and come so hard she forgets her own name. She wants to get so high her body feels like an abstract four dimensional concept. She wants to fight until she gets knocked out. She wants to eat an entire buffets worth of food. She wants to watch funny Youtube videos. She wants to take a ride on her motorcycle until the scenery is new and the sun is setting.

She exhales, forcing the air out in a rush.

She is seven, and she can do none of that. Well, she could probably find a drug dealer who would sell to her but she really wouldn't trust the product they gave her. Plus, she had been clean years before she even ended up in this world. As fucked up as things were, she really would never go back. The idea of being blitzed out of her head sounds good though.

The pastel mint green curtain beside her slides open with a quick clacking sound and the motion catches her eyes, interrupting her fond reminiscing of amphetamine abuse. Too lazy to sit up, she looks at the newcomer out of the corner of her eyes. Zabuza is sitting up in his bed, sheets pushed around his ankles, wearing nothing but hospital pajama pants and a shining new hitai ite. He is grinning maniacally.

"Wha-?"

Something hits her in the face.

Ryuishi just lays there and inhales slowly. She lets a long, loud groan fill the air as her small hand scrabbles up to grasp whatever is lying on her face. She can feel fabric and metal and when she takes it off her eyes, she is staring at four squiggly lines stamped into steel. She feels sick.

This was bought with the blood of fucking babies.

*Little tiny bodies with broken limbs, lying torn up and shredded.
Glassy eyes that are empty and accusing-*

She puts a cap on it again, and turns to the boy, who already has his tied haphazardly in his spiky hair. In the anime and manga it looked cool. In real life he looks like a fucking slob.

"Why?" she grumbles out, sluggishly rolling onto her stomach and stuffing her face into her pillow. It's scratchy and smells like cleaner.

"They said you put on a good show, even if you didn't kill a classmate." He mulls for a moment and continues, "Probably only because I got there first." He's totally serious about it too, like it's an okay thing to just admit to. It makes her blood boil, but she breathes deep and reminds herself that he has no idea how fucked up everything that happened was.

Then she screams into her pillow.

"Why are you doing that?" Zabuza asks in his grunty, deadpan, little boy way.

Ryuishi pauses, and turns to look at him. Or, at least tries to. Her long hair is in the way, and it takes a few seconds to blow it out of her face. When she does get a clear view, she inspects the boy through narrowed eyes. Zabuza never asks her anything, except for food, but even that comes out as a demand.

"Because I feel overwhelmed with emotions," she says slowly, and just a bit sarcastically.

The sarcasm flies right over Zabuza's head and he just grunts and traces his fingers over the metal plate in his hair. As if receiving that filthy, disgusting symbol made him overwhelmed with emotions.

It was like... like he was empathizing? No, no, not empathizing. Studying? Trying to understand?

Ryuishi doesn't know. She adds this to the long list of things she has no clue about. Things she has a hard time caring about right now.

She feels filthy and gritty, and her mouth tastes like liver and bile. The paper gown she has on is scratchy and too thin. The lights are murder to her eyes. She is shaken and unstable, she can't get her fucking thoughts in order. She needs a switch, a change, a new perspective. If she keeps up like this, she's going to have another breakdown. She can just feel it rushing up on her like a rogue wave.

She breathes deep again.

Little goals, she needs to set some little goals. Alright.

Get up, take a shower, do her hair, brush her teeth. Find food. Live, move forward, because that is all she can do.

She shifts, turning to climb out of bed. A pile of her clothes is set out on the table, unwashed and covered with flaky, gritty dried blood. It doesn't show up so much on the dark material of her cargo pants, but it is there.

She can smell it.

She mentally jots down 'burn clothes' and 'cry a little' to the list of things to do.

She shifts, and sweeps her hair over her shoulder, turning her back to Zabuza and the boy speaks up again.

"What's on your back?" he asks, this time like he is actually mildly curious. For a moment, she is thrown. What is on her back? The new scar she can feel? Is it a bug? Oh shit, fuck, she hopes it's not a bug. Kiri has to know that bedbugs in the hospital are bad news right?

Oh, wait. Zabuza has never seen her bare back before. She has tattoos.

He also hasn't seen her hair down before. Why couldn't he comment on that? Maybe he was being not socially reprehensible for once, and ignoring the fact that her butt was showing. She could feel the draft. Ah, a psychopathic child has seen her seven year old ass. That's a thing to jot down on her life's resume.

"Uh... what's it look like?" she asks, dodging his questions and reaching out for her clothes. The faster she can get dressed, the faster she can leave and take a shower.

"Animals. Snake bones." he grunts out.

She rolls her eyes. Always so chatty, that one.

"Then that's what it is." she answers. Man, he sure asked a lot of questions. Two of them in one day! That was more than he had asked the whole year before! Exciting changes, this stuff.

She crams her underwear and pants on, unable to bring out any shame at being seen naked. She's seven, and frankly, she never did care anyway. Zabuza's much too young to start being creepy and hormonal, so it's safe.

She slides her turtleneck on and cringes at the feel of it against her skin. It's stiff and gross, and she's pretty sure that it has smears of partially digested shit from popped intestines on it. She snags her brand new hitai ite and crams it in her pocket, casting one last glance at Zabuza.

"I'll meet you tomorrow at dawn. Come to the kitchens at Kagami's brothel," she says, stiff legged as she leaves.

At the Okiya, she is drowning in pitiful looks cast from a distance. It has only been a short time, but already everyone knows of the massacre. Keiko sweeps her up in her arms the moment she announces her presence, and squeezes her tight. The woman may be somewhat neglectful as a mother, but she fits the older sibling cast well. The smell of her cinnamon robes and the feel of her arms around her makes something inside Ryuishi settle down.

"I'm back," she whispers, clutching tight to her mothers robes.

Keiko lets out the daintiest sniff she has ever heard in her life, and squeezes tighter. They stay like that for a while, just holding each other, pleased to be alive. When Ryuishi declares she needs a shower, Keiko plants one last kiss on her forehead and lets her down.

She passes by Kagami Okaa-sama on the way back from picking out her clothes. The matron looks at her with a stern twinkle in her eyes, and to the newly minted kunoichi's surprise, grows a steely, yet fond smile.

"I always knew you were lucky," she says before sweeping away in a flow of silken robes.

She doesn't feel lucky. Not in the least.

When Ryuishi finally, finally makes it to the shower, all she can feel is distance. The stress is finally there, and she feels like she isn't in her body anymore. She rinses off the grime, blood, and sweat from her skin and she thinks.

Tomorrow, she starts life as a genin.

Genin in Water Country are not assigned instructors, or teams. Teamwork is the underlying training in Konoha, not Kiri. In the the bloody mist, you look out only for yourself, and the training for that begins young. You train by yourself, you get better by yourself, and if you are lucky, you catch the attention of a chunin or jounin to who will show you more, by yourself.

It explained why so many of their ninja went rogue. Besides having traumatic teachings and twisted schools, shinobi and kunoichi of the Mist relied on only their own strength to support themselves, and often grew isolated from others. There were no friends to keep you tied down and stable, and the system did little to inspire loyalty to the village. If you were already only looking out for number one, why stick with a village if you could get better paying work outside of it? If you could get past the Hunter nin who stayed inside Water Country, you were safe. Thus, high numbers of nuke nin and mercenaries.

Sometimes, if the new graduates were siblings, or very good friends, they worked together to survive. It wasn't rare, but it also wasn't the norm. By offering to meet Zabuza tomorrow, she had, once again, extended the proverbial hand. She had felt the need.

Zabuza was just a kid. A kid who wasn't neurotypical, who didn't understand compassion or empathy or social protocol. He was mentally unsound and his behavior was violent and rash and borderline suicidal. Taking on a hundred kids could have just as easily gotten him killed instead of recognized.

If she was right, and that was tentative, because psychology was a field that was hard to prove empirically, then Zabuza had Antisocial Personality Disorder in a world that actively encouraged the self destruction it led to.

He didn't see people as people. To him those children were nothing more than a mouse, or a piece of paper. They had attributes, and he recognized them as objects with distinct uses, but couldn't make that leap to living, breathing, sentient human being.

He might not even see himself as one.

Looking back on it, she realized that the only way Zabuza communicated was through fighting. In situations where he might have been happy, sad, angry, confused, or lonely he sought her out and they proceeded to beat the ever living shit out of each other. She would have to slowly stop that. She would have to provide an outlet, and make him use his words. She would have to help him learn to communicate in other ways, and try and find balance.

The thought overwhelmed her.

Ryuishi could barely balance out her own psyche, and she couldn't help anybody who didn't want to change. She could only offer options, and that ruined her.

She needed to help him, to help them. To help the kids and babies of this fucked up, shitty world. She needed to see them happy and stable and healthy. She needed to do it, because-

(She thinks of curly dark hair and freckles dusted over a thin nose. A happy, smiling face and every sport under the sun. She thinks of her sister, and her mother, and father and brothers. She thinks of *deaddeaddead* little bodies, ruined forever, their futures ripped from them too early. She thinks of *failurefailurefailure* .)

The hot water sliding off of her gets a little bit saltier as Ryuishi cries.

When she gets out and dresses, she feels.... better. Emptier, hollow, but back in her own body again. She eats dinner under the apprehensive looks of the girls in the Okiya. Keiko moms her a bit more than usual, but it feels friendly instead of forced. She goes to do her stretches, brushes her teeth, and meditates.

Her head is a wreck, and the others inside are more alive than usual, but already they are working on fixing things up. The angry, hungry, yelling part of herself is quieter for the moment, as if sated after being fed. She hates that she feels so content after what has

happened. She hates that part of her, the one that is so calm right now. She hates herself most of all.

She sleeps without dreaming.

The next morning, she gets up, showers again, fixes her hair, and begins to prepare breakfast for herself and Zabuza. Just as she is finishing up the meal the door at the end of the kitchen slides open and the boy is there, wearing no shirt, new pants, and the tachi he used for the massacre on his back. He looks like a miniature version of his older self, minus the arm warmers.

They share a simple breakfast of rice, rolled omelets and pickled vegetables in silence. Well, mostly silence.

"Don't pick the vegetables off your plate you bastard, eat it all."

"Don't tell me what to do, brat."

He eats half, and leaves the rest. She shrugs. Better than nothing.

Their shared teacher is away on a mission, and the two quickly agree that they can do d-ranks without his help. The duo walks through the early morning streets in quiet. The traders are glaring fearfully from their stalls and she can hear the whispers already. She stands close to Zabuza, making sure their shoulders touch. She does this not only to soak up the warmth he gives off and keep the chill of the winter day away, but to provide a united front.

"Look at that little demon. The whole school, gone!"

"-monster, not even human-"

"-his pet, only one that-"

"-heard the little witch-"

Oh, oh god. Are they? Are they calling her a witch? Because she might be okay with that. That sounds, like, super cool. Hopefully

witch catches on better than pet. She can only pray.

When they reach the missions office, her cheeks are red from the biting cold, and though highly inappropriate, she thinks Zabuza's nipples might be able to cut through glass. The warmth of the office is welcoming, and they go up, unafraid to take their first mission. The chunin in charge sneers down at them, handing over a mission file.

"So the demon shows his face, dragging his little pet behind," and dammit, that's not what she wanted to hear. "That was quite the show you put on, brat."

She can see Zabuza stiffening, his mania turning into rage. Ryuishi snatches up the file and wraps her arm around the boys beside her.

"Thank you for the mission sir." She chirps, high and sweet, turning them both around, "Have a nice day!" The '*I hope you choke on a literal bag of dicks.*' goes unsaid.

Abandoning the warmth and traipsing both in the cold, she looks over the mission. Clearing the village walls of wildlife. Great.

Zabuza looks at the arm that is still wrapped around his, shakes it off, and just glares at her. She can see his anger at her, at the chunin, his confusion at being touched. She heads it off.

"Hey, you ever heard the story of the A-team?" she asks, heading toward the east gate.

Ryuishi manages to distract him the whole way there by telling him the story of the illustrious group of shinobi, wrongly accused of betraying their village, who became Nuke Nin and soldiers of fortune. Named the A-team because of their penchant for taking only A-rank missions or higher. By the time they arrived, he had forgotten to be angry. She counted it as a success. She wishes that Konoha D-ranks and Kiri D-ranks were similar. She wouldn't mind babysitting or walking dogs, but nobody has money for that in Kiri. Instead you get sent out to kill dangerous animals, usually alone.

Soon, the pair are elbow deep in really pissed off boars and mangy wild dogs. Zabuza looks like he's having the time of his life, like he cannot believe he is actually getting paid to do this. Ryuishi is trying very, very hard not to get her outfit dirty. Call her a priss if you want, but she is sick and tired of blood on her clothes. She is a mid range fighter for fuck's sake. She was supposed to be pretty and deadly... from a distance. They get through the whole wall, and she feels a little like she just finished grinding on an old RPG.

The duo goes to the training ground after turning in their mission papers and collecting their pay. There is still a good amount of daylight, and they cannot afford to waste it.

This is how it goes on for weeks. They take a mission, finish it, and train. Each meal they share and each mission they take is a quiet reassurance that they will not abandon each other for the dog eat dog world that is Kiri. There still is a certain lack of positive emotions and friendly qualities, but they understand each other. They understand that they work best as a pair, that their teamwork is as good as it gets in Kirigakure. When one slips up, the other is there to cover their back. When one sleeps, the other is awake, keeping watch. When one is wounded, the other is there with bandages and sutures.

It is a slow, steady understanding, more of a business agreement than companionship, but it works. It is safe, it is comfortable. It's better for them both to keep up a quiet, amicable distance. Ryuishi watches over him, makes sure he eats his vegetables and receives positive human contact, waiting for the moment he wants to speak. Zabuza makes her get up in the morning and train until she can't move, not allowing her to wallow in guilt or stagnate in strength. There is... contentment.

Then, the Third Shinobi War begins.

AN: And it pours, because life isn't fair. Here we see some changes beginning to occur in Ryuishi's character, which will

become more obvious in later chapters. Her mood swings and mindset changes are a little more obvious and so is her emotional repression. She starts trying not to think so hard, not look too deeply at what this place is doing to her psyche, and she hates the way she is slowly turning to ignorance and violence to conform.

Zabuza is showing some curiosity, which makes him a little more vocal.

In other news, I will be going to an upcoming con in about a week, so I may have some trouble updating I will attempt to be consistent, it's just a warning. As always, a thank you to my beta, Enbi, and to all those who read and reviewed.

Meeting your Squad

I do not own Naruto.

The Third Shinobi War had no single start date. There was no single wrong or mistake that lit the flame. There was no one assassination, no singular fuck up, no budding nationalism or racial tension. It was nothing like the world wars that she had known from her past.

For a long, long time the Elemental countries had been skirmishing back and forth, edging in on each other's jobs and territories. Poached missions and sabotage abounded for years before Ryuishi had even been born. If you wanted to pinpoint the time it had all began, one only had to look back to the Second Shinobi War. From then, it had been a cold war between the five great countries. Nobody trusted each other and if you looked like you had a single weak link, one small lapse in defense, your neighbors would tear at until it bled out.

The day it had been announced that Kirigakure would begin waging war, Ryuishi and Zabuza had stood at the base of the the Mizukage tower with the rest of the village. She had listened to the words meant to inspire, words meant to uplift. She had seen the civilians' eyes glaze over, and she had been filled with dread.

All active forces were to report to the mission's office by the next morning.

Zabuza was grinning by her side, grinning like the cat that ate the canary as they walked home, and she could feel his energy levels like electricity against her skin. He was quiet, but ominously so, head filled with the glory of battle. They split up at the Okiya like they usually did, and watching him go, she felt something inside her heart die.

Ryuishi slid the door to the brothel open, and Kagami looked down at her with understanding and pity in her gaze. Dinner with Keiko had been filled with dread and silence, and that night, the brothel had never been busier. It seemed everyone wanted one last piece of ass before they died. Lying in her futon and ignoring the noises from below, she thought she could reach out and touch the desperation that lingered in the air.

War.

In the life before this, she had seven brothers. Each one spent at least four years in the service. Three of them had gone overseas for tours of duty. Three of them returned with haunted eyes and grim faces, the laughter lines bleached from their faces and replaced with wrinkles on their brows. They woke up in cold sweats and stayed up all night. Loud pops and whistles had sent them rolling and ducking. They drank until the point of oblivion and murmured the names of the dead as they slept.

Three of her brothers had gone to war, and when they came back home, three strangers had taken their place.

War was something her family had both loved and hated. Her father had served in war, and her mother had been born as her family ran from it. Her father's father had served, and both of her mother's parents had fought for their home country. In her past life, she could trace her lineage back for ages, and every single one of her ancestors had been a soldier, a pilot, a captain, a warrior. Battle was in her blood.

Her whole past life she had been raised with the understanding that war was a terrible and frightful thing. Her father told her it brought out the best and worst in people. He told her that war was a giant, impossibly large thing. That it was like a force of nature, and like a tsunami or earthquake, there would be no stopping it. That she could only prepare. That is why she had so many skills in survival and tactics, why she blended in so well with this world.

In both lives she had been born to be a fighter, and only in one would she see the battlefield.

That night, she slept, and she dreamed of strangers in her brothers' bodies. She saw them walk in her old home, and use their voices and words, but in their eyes there was something awful and inconceivable to her. The light was gone, and she only saw the Void, endless and eternal, calling her back.

The dawn came and a weary Keiko woke her. For a moment it looked like she wanted to snatch her up and hide her away, but Ryuishi placed her hand on the woman's and met her eyes.

There would be no running from this.

Quietly, Keiko started weeping, and she moves toward the shower, pretending not to hear. She luxuriates longer than normal under the hot spray of water, knowing that where she goes, she will miss this. The calm and sensual nature of the Okiya, the cinnamon of Keiko's robes, the feeling of being clean.

She packs her bag, making sure to fill it with extra food and gear. Ryuishi takes special care with a jar full of black, wrapping it in a shirt. She takes extra time with her morning stretches and eats her fill of grilled fish and rice before making sure her meteor hammer slides instead of clinking, it is oiled so well. Her hitai-ate is tied firmly around her right bicep, displaying her false loyalty for all to see.

Before she leaves she sits down in front of the mirror and memorizes her face. The laugh lines, the length of her lashes, the fullness of her hair. She traces the curve of her cheek and the hollow of her throat. She wants to remember Watanabe Ryuishi. She wants to think back and know the person that she was, like she knew Cat Frank before her. She wants to remember them.

Then, she picks up a single steel pin, and twists her long hair around it, pulling her length into a bun that lies close to her head. The way she used to do in her old life.

When she goes, it will be Ryuishi and Cat that march away from their home, and if they survive, they will not be the same people who left.

Zabuza is already impatiently waiting by the kitchen door, an empty plate in front of him. Kagami and Keiko are crowding the exit, and he stands just behind them. Ryuishi looks up at the steely Matron, and the woman returns her stare. There is no pity or condemnation this time, only understanding. She is not in active duty anymore, but she remembers. Keiko swoops down like a bird and clutches her close for a moment, and the girl melts into her hold. She has never felt so close to the woman.

"Thank you for being my mom, Keiko." Ryuishi whispers for the first time in her life, acknowledging the woman's place as more than birth giver.

Then she is pulling away, past the crowd of girls and into the gloomy morning, to stand beside her fellow shinobi.

The early morning streets are fuller than usual. All around the duo people are tumbling out of brothels and homes, trudging towards the same destination with gritted teeth and determined eyes. The cylindrical silhouette of the missions office stands ominously ahead, outlined by the gold and purple morning light. Like wraiths they move through the mists, each shadow a silent figure, gliding onwards to their uncertain future.

Ryuishi wants to babble, to talk and let out some of her nervous energy, but to break the silence seems taboo. This is the calm before the storm, the quiet before the chaos. So instead of running her mouth, she shuffles closer to the boy at her side, who is buzzing with energy. Absorbing his warmth is comforting and familiar, and she can feel the furnace of his torso at her back. She reminds herself that this is the one she is going to protect, this is the one she has to stick by.

They make it to the building, and there is a crowd around them, spilling out of the doors. She is too short to see over them. The silence is broken here and chattering fills the air as people receive

their orders and ponder who they will be with or what they will be doing. They wait for what seems like hours until they reach the same chunin that handed them their first mission, only he is looking grimmer than before. They give their registration numbers, and he tells them to meet their squadron by the north gate. Ryuishi thanks her lucky stars that Kiri had enough sense not to split them up. The missions they did together so efficiently must really stand out.

The duo nods and accepts their orders before splitting away from the mob and heading towards the rest of their group. They reach the plaza in front of the imposing gate, and she cries out in joy when she spies a familiar shade of blue with a new looking chuunin vest. Zabuzza tenses when she snatches up his wrist and drags them over.

"Hoshigaki-senpai! Hoshigaki-senpai!" Ryuishi shouts, her husky voice carrying over the mumbles of the motley crew that has begun to gather.

A scowling face whips toward the noise, beady eyes searching for the caller. When he settles on the short, black haired brat racing toward him, boy in tow, he closes his eyes and makes an exasperated face. Good to see he remembers her.

"Hoshigaki-senpai!" she chirps once more, her heart suddenly feeling much, much more confident in what is happening, "Are you part of squad eleven?"

Any hope of escaping the foul mouthed child shrivels up and dies inside of him, and Ryuishi receives her answer in the form of a pained groan and a head turned heavenwards, as if asking for guidance.

She beams. "That's fucking great news!"

Cracking an eye open he glances down her, a grimace twisting his lips. "Well if it isn't the weak stomached little brat." he says, a taunting lilt to his voice.

"Now that's just mean, Hoshigaki. We both know that your strike caused me to lose my lunch. I'll have you know I usually never throw up." she banters back.

"No, you vomit very easily." Zabuza grunts out, blunt as ever.

She turns to Zabuza, bewildered. When had he even-? Oh, she dragged him here, right. She releases his wrists and scowls at him as he glares at her, rubbing the red skin near his hand to return blood flow.

"When? When did I throw up?" she demands, affronted at the accusation.

"Last year when we had to run in class and you had just eaten the hard eggs you had in your pocket. Eight months ago when you got hit by the Yuki kid. Seven months ago when you drank milk. Six months ago you first tried using genjutsu. Four months ago when you drank milk. Two months ago when you insisted on burning the remains of the dogs and pigs. Last week when you drank milk."

Ryuishi lets out an indignant huff and turns away from the blank faced boy to complain to the young teenager, only the blue hued teenager is laughing, loudly. Tears gather in the corners of his eyes as she watches.

"W-why do you keep drinking milk?" he chokes out, clutching his stomach.

Ryuishi looks abashed, her face flushing, and looks at her sandaled feet. She kicks the concrete a few times. "It tastes good," she mumbles. Kisame laughs harder.

Feeling ashamed, she is glad she lied. She's not sure she could live it down if she had told him that she forgets that she can't consume dairy. At least Zabuza had the decency not to tell him about the time she vomited on herself a few months back when they were passing through the butchers market and she saw maggots.

Kisame collects himself and breathes hard, and she remembers her manners. "Hoshigaki-senpai, this is Zabuza, apprentice to the wielder of Kubikiribocho. Zabuza, this is Hoshigaki Kisame, apprentice to the wielder of Samehada."

Zabuza grunts, and Kisame nods his head in greeting. They eye each other speculatively. Then, the older of the two looks back at her, curious.

"How did you rope this one in, brat?" he asks.

Ryuishi tsks at him and crosses her arms. "I'll have you know that he sought me out, you dick."

He swats the side of her head for the insult, and fuck! That really smarts. She clutches her head and smooths a hand over her hair to make sure it lies flat. Kisame rolls his eyes at the vanity of it, but turns back to the spiky haired youth in front of him.

"So? What is she to you?"

Zabuza grins and turns to examine the preening girl.

"She is my tool." he answers and Ryuishi answers with an instinctive "Fuck you, I ain't nobody's tool!" and receives another swat, this time from Zabuza. She hunches on the ground, clutching her head and whimpering under her breath.

Kisame eyes their antics speculatively, darting between the duo. "I guess she needs a little more sharpening," he comments.

Zabuza nods, then holds up a single finger to the larger boy, as if asking him to wait and watch. Then, he stretches an open hand in front of the whining girl, and she looks at it for a few seconds before digging into one of her numerous pockets and placing a wrapped bundle in his hand.

"Jeez, I thought you already ate, you pig." she grumbles, standing up.

A blue palm is shoved in front of her face directly after and she bristles, but digs through her pants and forks over another wrapped okonomiyaki.

"I'm not a vending machine you pricks!"

But the two ignore her and enjoy the savory treat, not even bothering to look at her. The shark man raises his brow and give the smaller boy an appreciative nod. His next words are spoken through a mouthful of food.

"I guess she is pretty useful."

Eventually, squadron eleven gathers at the north gate. It is comprised of six genin, three chunin, and a single jounin who will oversee their groups. Their job is to run guard supplies, check the traps, maintain outposts and, in this case, set up some of the meaner traps that will act as a deterrent. Their current assignment is to make rounds in the northern sector of Water Country and is slotted to last three weeks before they return to the village, where they will have three days off to recuperate, then head out again.

The genin are split up evenly under a chunin. The other four genin are older by a few years, the oldest being at least fourteen. They are split into teams under their allotted chunin, two under an aspiring traps specialist and two under a long range fighter, if the arsenal of throwing weapons are anything to go by. Unsurprisingly, she and Zabuzza are slotted off under Kisame's command as a frontal assault team. This decision causes her a small amount of stress. They do know she uses a mid range weapon and genjutsu, right?

They set out at mid morning, making their way around to the edge of the main island, which only takes about a day and a half, but the whole squad is buzzing with tension. Kisame sets them up in a wedge formation and they follow directly to the right of the jounin,

who goes by Suikami. To the left is the long range unit, and behind trails the traps specialists.

There aren't many trees that allow for branch hopping in water country, and instead, the squad flits through the fog like a murder of crows. The silence of the group is deafening. They are complete strangers thrust together in order to serve. They have no history, no drills run together or time spent learning. They are individuals clever and strong enough to survive Kiri alone, and now they are squished together and expected to work.

The pace they set is steady and not too fast, but Ryuishi has some difficulty keeping it. Her legs are far shorter than anyone else's, and it shows. When the camp is being set, as punishment for being a child, Kisame puts her on dinner duty. Secretly, she thinks he's just being sexist. Luckily, she expected sexism and is always carrying food.

The units splinter into their groups, each chunin getting to know their new underlings and the jonin wandering in between them. There are no fires, and their voices are hushed whispers in the night.

Kisame is perched on a boulder that is half sunken in the ground, and Zabuza is sitting with his legs crossed beside him. Digging into her calf pockets, Ryuishi manages to procure six onigiri that she had taken from the freezer this morning. She hands two to each boy, and Kisame looks mildly appalled at their existence.

"How much food do you have on you right now?" he asks, curiosity lining his voice.

Ryuishi ponders for a moment as she squeezes in between the two, shivering from the cold. When she settles down, arm around Zabuza's shoulders and legs stretched across Kisame's lap for optimal warmth absorption, she answers.

"Not including supplies in my pack? A pound of dried fruit, half a pound of dried meat, at least fourteen ounces of various candies and

some trail mix."

"Really?"

"Really really."

"That's ridiculous, why do you have so much food?" he asks, bewildered even as he takes a bite of his rice ball, letting out a pleased hum at the shrimp inside.

Her eyes slide over to look at Zabuza, who has already finished both of his and is glaring at her. As if she is going to hand him more-the kid already ate most of her jerky during the journey here. She's convinced he's a black fucking hole. Looking back at the teenager as she bites into her own, savoring the tuna inside, she shrugs.

"I guess it's just habit."

They wash their teeth and bunk down, Kisame being assigned middle watch for the night. He is still awake when Zabuza sets out a single bedroll and climbs in, and he watches with keen eyes as Ryuishi removes the pin in her hair, braids it, and goes to follow him inside the cocoon. When she slips inside, snug against her homicidal heater, he quirks a brow.

"Isn't it little inappropriate?"

She sighs. She forgot that some of the duo's usual system would seem odd from an outside perspective. "I'm seven, he's nine. I'll stop stealing his warmth when I wake up to a stiffy stabbing me in the thigh."

Kisame chokes on air and Zabuza seems confused. She doesn't even think the spiky boy has the first inkling about sex. Which is good, because then she couldn't use him as a furnace. As it stands, the ravages of puberty have yet to touch them. Yet.

She goes to sleep, feeling a little uneasy because of the strangers and weird environment, but secure in the knowledge that Kisame is as loyal as they come.

The next day, when they reach the ocean, Ryuishi's mood soars. When the others take to the surface, she follows the path the trap specialist took and heads below the surface, a pair of Gills between her teeth. Kisame doesn't seem to mind, and even looks a little amused.

Here, under the waves, she isn't at war, she isn't a child soldier. She is simply alive.

Her father must have been right, all oceans really do connect. The salty brine saps her heat and stings her eyes, and the rhythmic lull of the tide is so achingly familiar. It is the same, this ocean. The same from her memories, the same that first claimed her heart, the same as her home.

It is easier to keep up with the group this way. She has always been faster when traveling in water. They go slower the next few days, allowing the trapping unit to work their magic. The long range fighters keep an eye out, but for the next few weeks, they spot none.

By the time the group is ready to return, they are tired and the tension is almost gone. The units know their jobs within the squad and everybody has a better idea of what to do and who to go to for what. They aren't a smooth running machine like Konoha would produce, but they are isolated fighters secure inside the miniature community they have. The jonin, Suikami, even bullies Ryuishi into handing over a good share of her candies during their travels. The asshole.

By the time they are ready to return to the village, Ryuishi sleeps with Zabuza at one shoulder, and Kisame at the other.

AN: So, we begin to ease into the war and Kisame makes a comeback! Ryuishi is terrible at telling ages! The ball is begining to roll, and we are about to be in for a wild ride.

A shout out to all those great readers who reviewed and read, and a blessing on the head of my Beta, Enbi. Reminder that the next chapter might be late due to an upcoming con.

Meeting the new Mundane

I do not own Naruto.

They never make it back to the village after their first mission. A messenger hawk finds them on a smaller landmass not too far from the main island.

The walking arsenal spots it first, his hand going to a hooked kunai along his belts, and then Suikami is suddenly right there, at his side. Their leader's hazel eyes cut through the fog and flash dangerously at the pinprick shadow that looms far above them. Standing tense at Kisame's right, Ryuishi cannot see it even then. It is not until she hears the snapping of air against wings that she understands.

A beautiful, well groomed osprey glides over them, locking eyes with the leader of their squad before accepting something that no one else can see. The shadow of its wings spread out across the mist below as it circles lower, like the phantom spirit from some old forgotten world. A scroll falls from its talons and rushes through the sky in freefall. It tumbles for only a few seconds before being snatched from the air by the jonin, who sets them in diamond position around him with a hand signal.

The graceful predator flits silently back into the gloom.

Ryuishi can see the jonin's grim face from the corners of her eyes, his lips turned downward as his eyes dart around the paper. He runs a single hand through his scruffy brown hair and sighs, the scroll crinkling in his grasp. No good news then.

More hand signs, and they make a diamond formation as a squad, pointing to the west. Each unit copies it in miniature. Suikami is on point, and her unit takes up the rear this time, allowing for greater

protection for the squad as whole rather than the more aggressive position from before.

They move on his signal, maintaining silence. There is no question that they will be gone longer than expected, and that these new orders are nothing good. The squad does not show a single sign of it, but she can sense the morale drop. Still, nobody questions the commander. That would be insubordination, and for Kiri nin, the consequences of that are nothing good.

Tired from the previous month of hard travel and disappointed at the way things seem to be going, they begin to head west.

They travel for days, and still nobody knows what they are doing except the jonin. Supplies that were running low before are now gone completely. They would have lasted back to the village, but the new orders have set them off pace. At night it takes longer for them to set up camp because they are tired and hungry. The group is worn and it is showing. They want showers and warm food, perhaps even a full night's rest, but out here such things are impossible. Only a single month into this war and already its forces are doubling up on missions.

Ryuishi finally earns a spot outside of the unit, sharing some of the extra food she brought with her. It is only a few sacks of rations that require water to be edible, but it is more than the nothing they had before. They only last a few days among such a large number of people, and they are awful and bland. Those few days buy her time though, until they can reach water, where she takes it a step further, foraging from the land.

They reach the ocean once more, and fires are still out of the question, but she manages. Sending another prayer of thanks to her father, she uses her skill in the water for its original purpose, spearing a good sized flounder in the shallower waters with the bladed end of her weapon. When she drags it up, a few grimace, but she spies decidedly happy grins on both Kisame and Zabuza, who are happy for fresh meat, no matter the source. Impressed, Suikami

makes it official and orders her to scrounge up what she can until the group can restock. Later that night a few balk at the idea of eating freshly gathered wakame and raw fish, but more of them are grateful.

The waters are cold enough that she doesn't worry too much about toxic algae, but she does make sure to check for parasites when she fillets the cleaned fish. The jonin claims at least half of one of the flat, ugly creatures before absconding away. She has no doubt the older ninja on this team could have done exactly what she did. She guesses that they just wanted to avoid getting into the cold water in the first place.

Ryuishi can think of no place she'd rather be.

In the gloom of the night, when she is braiding her loose hair and preparing to slide in next to her heater, she is surprised by a large hand resting on her shoulder. Looking up, she catches the tail end of an appreciative nod from a certain blue chunin. She returns it, and climbing in next to Zabuza, who is grumbling about her cold extremities, she feels more content than usual.

Two days later, after a week of travel, their squad comes across a town. It is one of the major waypoints for Mist shinobi, as it lies only a few days of hard travel from the front lines. Something cold and hollow settles in her gut as they approach, and she doesn't think it is out of dread. It feels familiar and empty.

Suikami splits them up into units and tells them to secure the perimeter of the settlement. To her, it is obvious that the mission has something to do with someone in this place, but she is currently too apathetic to be curious, and she silently follows orders.

Entering the town, she can feel the anger and despair, and looking around, she can guess why. The place looks like it had been nice, once upon a time. Now it is rundown and tired. The buildings look like they have recently seen a battle or two. The walls are pitted with dents that indicate thrown weapons, and one of the outlying walls

looks like it took exploding tag or jutsu damage. There are a few hastily cobbled roofs and more than one tarped up building. She can see derisive looks being cast at them, and most of its citizens look like they are experiencing rationing for the first time in their lives. They have nothing on the gaunt and worn faces of the orphans she knows, but their clothes are dirty, and their eyes speak of new hunger.

This place is dangerous, she decides. Nothing is as dangerous as the privileged being forced from their lifestyle.

They walk the streets with a grace that no civilian holds, and blaming eyes land on them. Especially on the blue skin and exotic features of her unit leader. Kisame stares around them in a sort of trance, eyes taking in the scenery around them, the mothers shielding their children from his gaze. Ryuishi wonders why he looks like he has been smacked in the face with a rubber dildo.

Then it hits her. Well, not the metaphorical dildo, but rather an epiphany. Kisame was an orphan, yes, but he wasn't a nameless one. She doesn't know who his parents were, or what they did. She does know that he has been living under the supervision of Fuguki, one of the legendary seven swordsmen, for a long time. That meant he was raised in one of the orphanages, then probably stationed in the barracks district. Both are much nicer than the akasen from which she and Zabuza hail.

He probably only ever saw the lowlife of Kirigakure from a distance in the market or trade district, and even then rarely. They know better than to show themselves so blatantly there, just doing so is asking for a beating from a vendor or a bored ninja. Nobody would look at him too hard in the places he was raised because of the fearsome appearance of Mist forces in general. Hell, next to his teacher, he looks downright normal. Even Ryuishi forgets he looks different most of the time.

Here though, here he is an anomaly for the first time. Here he can see the suffering that Mist puts its people through up close. It is in

the glares of the men and bruises of the women. It is in the hungry, lethargic demeanor of the children. Almost everyone seems to blame their misfortune on them, if the whispers are anything to go by. Technically, they aren't even wrong. The shinobi system *did* do this.

Monitoring the mass that seems to be gathering around their unit, she feels apprehensive. There is nothing good that comes out of angry and abused people. Amongst the crowd, she can see it in their eyes, the need for a scapegoat. It is a certain light that dances in the hazel, green, blue, grey and golden eyes.

Ryuishi's head swivels around, suddenly nauseous. She is looking so desperately for that pair of eyes that she almost doesn't notice the first object being thrown.

"Freak!" one of them calls, hurling a pebble. It is slow and easily caught before it strikes Zabuzza, but it seems to be the spark that the others need to find their rebellious courage. The three instinctively huddle closer together as debris is hurtled at them.

"Monster! Go back to your snobby clan and leave us alone!" a woman's voice screeches, mistaking the orphan shinobi for something he is not. Ryuishi bats another pebble away from the bandaged face boy, who is staring at her, arms crossed, not lifting a damn finger. The bastard seems to enjoy watching her do his work for him. She strikes down few stones in rapid succession after shooting him a glare. This is probably another one of those 'You're my tool, you do it' things.

The stones are getting bigger, fist sized, and somebody is mixing glass into the equation. She is almost having to work to throw them at the ground instead of the people. Not that she would hit them. Her throwing aim is still crap. Kisame is just standing there behind her, tense as stone. As if he is absolutely stunned that Kiri's citizens could be angry at the government system that repeatedly forces them into poverty and death. He looks-dare she say it- *hurt* at the people's words.

"Demon! Murderer!" a man shouts somewhere to her left, and fuck, that one was totally glass.

"Blue skinned devil!" cries a smaller, younger voice, and Kisame literally flinches, but the crowd is growing, drawing more and more in. Everybody wants to vent out their frustrations, and they do make a convenient scapegoat. The objects are actually a little hard to sweep from the air with her hands and feet, but she refuses to draw a weapon against righteously pissed people without training.

"Whore!" and hey now, she's seven. Come on, that seems like a little much.

"Just do us a favor and die!"

This is getting out hand. There are too many of them, throwing way too much. They're picking debris from the street, anything they can get their hands on. Pieces of shattered walls and broken windows. There's even some blunted, warped weapons in the mix, leftovers from whatever happened here before. Her unit is being useless, and she can't stop them all.

No sooner than the thought crosses her mind does she spot something definitely not thrown by a civilian. It's mixed in with a hail of glass and stones, heading right for the nape of Kisame's neck, fast.

Ryuishi leaps on instinct, just as the chunin whirls. A single thought flits across her mind:

Oh, sonofabitch, this is dumb.

He turns just in time to see a kunai fly in between her outstretched fingers and slide into her collar. It's thrown with such force it knocks her back midair, into his chest, which is like a brick wall. She would be impressed with the way he caught her but God! Lord above in the heavens! Spirits of her fucking ancestors, that hurts like a bitch!

Zabuza seems to snap out of whatever dickery he was doing before and draws the tachi on his back, snarling at the crowd, who seem stunned that she even got hit. She is too, a little bit. It was going to happen eventually, but she never thought it would be like this. It never even occurred to her that the first wound she would receive in war would be in a little village full of civilians. Still though, her ego is content that this knife was not thrown by one of them. She didn't get owned by a noob. It would be reassuring if it didn't hurt like the goddamn dickens.

She's clutching her hand tight around the base of the wound, where the kunai is still jutting out like a very painful signpost from the ground. Only the ground is her collar, and the metaphor sucks in general. It doesn't really start gushing until she removes the knife with a wail and shoves it in her leg pocket before the others can see. Kisame is gripping her other shoulder tight with his free hand and turning her whole body to face him, his eyes darting around for the culprit. She feels tiny in his grasp. The teenager is fucking enormous, and she guesses that this is what dwarves feel like. Or children. Wait, she is a child.

Zabuza is taking threatening steps forward, as if slaughtering them all would fix the fact that his tool got hurt. The silence is deafening, save for her occasional, very called for whimper. Ryuishi catches her team's attention with a hand to Kisame's arm, her dark eyes meeting his. He focuses on her face, then her wound, then her face again, looking confused.

"They're just scared, Hoshigaki-senpai." she tells him.

"But-"

"Let's just finish securing the perimeter and meet back with the squad. I think the long range chunin guy knows some iryo jutsu."

Anger flashes across his face at the seeming injustice of it. She smiles sardonically at him, tilting her brows and swallowing what a

big baby she is for a moment. "It's only a little cut. I'm sure it's not the worst that will happen to me."

He looks like he's about to argue some more, but she plays the card she knows is closest to his heart.

"Orders come first, Hoshigaki-san." she whispers, looking out at the walls yet to be checked.

His hands tighten on her shoulders and his arm squeezes around her ribs for a second. Then he nods and places her back on the ground and motions at Zabuza, who looks pissed, but heeds the order. She stumbles for a second before peeking back up at the crowd. They are white faced and stricken, waiting on the retribution from the trio. She looks around for a moment, searching while her hand places pressure on the wound. Hazel, green, blue eyes on tanned and greyish skin. None of them are right. She narrows her eyes and attempts to see farther. There, in the distance, she finds a face watching her a little too keenly, and she smiles at it, sly and sweet. Her free hand sends a message, patting her pocket.

"I know." it says.

A warning. An invitation.

A high, keening noise sounds out of the dark haired girl's throat as they settle in for the night at a local inn. Which is surprising, because she thought that they were attempting to keep a low profile. Actually, she doesn't give a flying fuck.

Completing the assignment with a stab wound was probably the dumbest thing she has done in a while. Scratch that, jumping up was the dumbest thing. Kisame was already turning to catch it by the time she leapt. He would have caught it. Or dodged. It would have happened. Afterall, he was alive far past this in canon. Her pain was stupid and pointless. The thought did not help her collarbone hurt less, though.

She collapses on the bed in the room her unit is given the moment she walks through the door and screams into the threadbare pillow.

"Are you feeling overwhelmed by emotions again?" Zabuza asks blankly, stepping through the door.

If she didn't know him, she would think that asshole was making a joke. Good thing she does know better, because the idea of the spiky haired boy being a having a sense of humor scares her a little.

She turns her face and cold, squinting black eyes glare at him. "Eat a thousand dicks and die." she hisses through clenched teeth.

He grunts and flips her a dirty hand sign before entering the bathroom. She recognizes it from the gestures that the whores use in the akasen to pick up johns and make crude japes with each other. Something like Kiri's secret dirty sign language.

She... should have never taught Zabuza that.

"No, you blow yourself!" she shouts at the empty doorway, "And give me some of your stupid bandages!"

A sigh from the entrance to the room lets her know that Kisame has come back from the debriefing with Suikami. He must be so proud of the genin under his command.

"I have bandages in my pack," he tells her in an exasperated voice.

"Good," she spits, "Zabuza's will probably infect me with disgusting face syndrome, WHICH HE HAS!"

A warm, wet towel flies from the bathroom and it would have smacked her face, if it hadn't been for her reflexes. The movement jars her injury and she lets out a keening noise. Kisame ruffles through his pack and fishes out a clean roll of bandages, rolling his eyes. he hadn't known what to expect from his first genin team, but it certainly wasn't this. Not a deranged little boy with blood lust that

might exceed his own. Certainly not the foul mouthed little girl that vomited on him a year and a half ago.

He looks at the whining little girl on the bed, clenching his fingers around gauze. She is changing before him as time goes on. Undergoing some sort of transformation into something he hasn't seen before.

The little kimono clad liar he met that day isn't the same as the bleeding kunoichi sitting before him now. That little girl didn't know how to properly dodge a sword, let alone bat a flurry of projectiles out of the air. The brat isn't even the same as the one from the beginning of the mission, desperate and scared, clinging to a familiar face.

This girl took a kunai for a commander on instinct alone, and insisted on completing the mission. This one protected both boys at her side, without a single thought of leaving them on their own. This one looks at them with something like fondness in her eyes, accepting them as they are. She is as loud and brash and crude as before, but she is caring and loyal too. He sees it in the small actions she takes. The way she doesn't give raw vegetables to the bandaged faced brat, because he doesn't like them. How she made sure he got the shrimp onigiri when there was some to give, because she noticed he ate them quicker than the others. The way she makes conversation possible at night, taunting and teasing until all three are bickering in whispered voices, scrunched close to throw an elbow or jab if one steps over the line. He wonders what she will end up being at the end of this change, and how many of her faces he will see on the way there.

He stands, bandages in hand and turns to her, watching her struggle as she attempts to pull her arm from and opening in the shirt.

"Let me help," he offers.

"Trying to get my shirt off I see. I always knew it would come to this." she remarks, smirking at him, a hand still trying to retract through

fabric by sheer force of will.

Kisame regret his earlier thoughts. He doesn't want to see anything this brat has to offer. Too much cheek, not enough common sense.

Still, she did take a hit for him.

He sighs, exasperated, and leans over her, gripping the hem of her shirt with his free hand and pulling it. It gives her just enough space to wriggle free from the garment. He flings the ruined cloth to the side and purposefully locks eyes with her.

"You are seven," he tells her, "And disgusting."

She squawks at the insult and places her hand over her heart. "I am a damn queen, and you should be fucking honored that you're even allowed to touch me." she answers, nose in the air, voice haughty.

Zabuza snorts from the bathroom. She ignores him.

"You can call me queen bee, because all the honey's love me." she continues.

"That doesn't even make any sense," Kisame says, snatching the wet towel from her hand and beginning to clean up the skin around the wound, "You must be delusional from blood loss."

"You must be the delusional one, because even shitstain like Zabuza can see-MOTHERFUCKER!"

Kisame gives her a grin and presses the pinkening towel a little harder to her collar.

"Gotta make sure it's clean when the medic comes back, don't we?"

"Fuck you, you arrogant cum stained-aaAGHHH!"

He grits his teeth this time, and there is a warning in his eyes. Ryuishi, in a fit of wisdom, keeps her mouth occupied with wails and

shrieks of pain instead of insults.

Zabuza finally emerges from his place in the bathroom, carrying an armload of warm, wet towel. Literally an armload. Kisame shoots him a speculative glance.

"Why did you..." he trails off.

The boy just grunts and walks over, shoving the wet mess at the teenager and gesturing his head at the girl on the bed. Kisame stares at them for a moment before giving the kid the most done face Ryuishi has ever seen.

"We only need one."

Zabuza grunts in acknowledgment, and in a fit of genius, simply lets the dripping, soggy mess drop to the floor in a pile before heading to the other side of the bed and lying down on it. He looks like he's going to take a nap. Ryuishi cackles at his actions, then yelps as Kisame gets back to work.

No, he didn't know what to expect from his first genin assignment, but it wasn't this.

The long range specialist comes in later that night and gives a half assed attempt at fixing her shoulder. It looks much better, and the wound is nowhere near as deep, but the feeling of chakra invading her had been awful. She hated every fucking second of it, and judging by the shivers and glances the man kept sending her, he hated it too.

So, stiff jointed and still aching, Ryuishi had stumbled into the shower, washed herself in the luke warm drizzle, and bemoaned her fate as she dressed in her old pants and a new shirt. She bitched a bit more to her two companions and ate a meal before falling asleep on the opposite side of the bed that Zabuza already rested in. Only to wake hours later, a pressing urge to piss guiding her into the restroom.

Silently she shifts out of the sheets to relieve herself, taking special care as she untangles herself from Zabuza's clinging hands. She is quiet like a mouse as she glides across the inn's wooden floors and enters the cold tile room. She is washing her hands when she notices it.

High in the bathroom window, a serpent is flicking its forked tongue in the night air. Jesus H. Christ, she hopes that a summoner cannot see through their summon's eyes. Wait, snakes have terrible eyesight. That's a relief, because that would have been very, very weird. Unless ninja snakes are different. She hopes not.

Ryuishi is glad she prepared beforehand this time, and unpacks the kunai from her pants pocket. It is Konoha standard issue, easy to identify because of its lack of an extra side guard. It would be easy for any Kiri native to spot the difference between the blades, even a civilian could do it. The knife was how she had known that it hadn't been a random person in the crowd who had injured her.

Carefully, she unwinds the cloth from around the handle and stretches it across the counter and looks around the bathroom for something to write with. Spotting nothing, she motions for the serpent to wait a moment and quietly darts back into the room, returning with a pen that had been on the dresser near the lamps.

A pen. A fucking honest to god felt tipped pen. What she wouldn't have given to have one of these four years ago. She hates this world, more than ever. Seriously, fuck them and their dainty ass calligraphy brushes. She's keeping this after they leave. She is never going to let go of it again.

She uncaps it and scrawls a message across the material before wrapping it back around the blade. The snake in the window gazes at her with the cold eyes of a reptile as she approaches and opens its mouth wide, exposing two very sharp fangs.

Ryuishi places the kunai in its mouth lengthwise and watches as it slithers out of her admittedly limited view. She can only hope she

hasn't made a giant mistake.

Tired, she leave the room and crawls back under the blankets. Only, when she flips around to view the wall, Kisame's apparently reflective fucking eyes are watching her. Panicked, she blurts out the first thing that comes to mind.

"I wouldn't go in the bathroom till morning if I was you." she whispers.

The eyes blink. "You're disgusting." comes the soft reply.

"Yah, probably, but you're my friend anyway." she tells him, flipping around and drawing the blankets up.

The fact that he does not deny it makes her smile as her lids close.

AN: This is a rough chapter, and I must have gone over it a billion times. Here we see, 1) Ryuishi's fondness for her boys. 2) team bonding 3) introduction of sub plot important to the main plot 4)so much other shit. Like I said. Rough.

Okay, this con has me tuckered out! A thanks to my beta enbi and all those who continuously review, and those who lurk and read!

Meeting the Monsters

I do not own Naruto. Trigger warnings for gore.

Ryuishi never did figure out what the actual assignment for her squad was. They hung around for a few days and left, and that was it. There were no signs of enemies or allies the whole time. No goods to move, no wounded to escort back, no shipments to guard. It seems to her that they were only stationed in the town to keep up an intimidating shinobi presence, which might be more accurate than she wants. On day five, they journey back to the village, and she never sees that town again.

The whole squad receives three days of rest, as promised before the double up. Ryuishi does not go back to the Okiya. She doesn't want to be that person who is there one day and gone another. Ryuishi does not want the Keiko to have to constantly acknowledge the fact that one day, she may not see her daughter wandering the wooden halls or cooking in the kitchens. That one day, her daughter might be gone and she will never know exactly how or why, and there might not be enough of her for a funeral.

If she survives this war, she will come back to Keiko and Kagami, but until then, she will not meet with them. It would be too hard to slide back into the comfort of her futon and the familiarity of her routine. She would want to never wander out again. It would be harder still to make the others watch as she grows more and more distant, constantly fretting over her next assignment and the battlefield, barely acknowledging their existence.

She knows what it is like to watch from the sidelines. She will not do that to them.

So, she confines herself within the barracks and the market districts, never looking back to the akasen. For three days she removes

herself from her traveling companions and relishes in the feel of warm showers and clean clothes. The ability to take a piss in an actual toilet delights her, almost as much as toilet paper. She uses the pay from the missions she and Zabuza took previously to restock supplies and buy extra food rations. Most of the time though, she sleeps, happy to escape her reality for just a few days.

The next mission lasts another month, a supply run to a smaller medical outpost. It is a little more jarring than the first. They run into several groups of bandits formed of low level deserters and desperate civilians. As the frontal assault unit of the squad, the trio is left to dispose of them while the others watch. Ryuishi shoves her disgust at the others watching to the back of her mind, with the pity for the bandits. She buries them both with the other things she likes to not think about, like whatever shivers inside her with pleasure when they execute the bandits.

The three aren't smooth when they fight and getting used to a third person is tricky for her and Zabuza, but there is a certain amount of trust that has already been established between them. It is hard not to establish a connection when you share meals with people every day and pool heat every night. By the time they journey out for their third mission, they are working together almost as well as an actual trained team.

Soon a fourth mission passes, then a fifth, and the eleventh squad has become a home away from home. There isn't a lot of love between them and everyone is rough around the edges, but they work. More than anything else, they work. Her squad becomes *hers*, and her unit even more so. The squad may warn her of incoming and keep watch at night, but it is her unit that is right there when a bandit's blade is rushing toward her. It is her unit that jokes with her and keeps her warm at night. They are her boys, and she is theirs.

The squad's sixth mission together is drastically different from the first five. They travel to the outer islands, near the border of Konoha and Kumo to restock supplies in old outposts. It is further than they

have ever gone before and much, much closer to the frontlines than Ryuishi feels comfortable with. The closer the squad gets, the more nervous she becomes.

There is something hollow and empty in the air that she cannot describe with words. It pulls at the tendrils of something inside of her. The feeling pulses through the air erratically and without warning at all hours, and she hates the squirming that it causes inside of her. It knocks all thoughts from her head, and clouds her mind for minutes afterward. At nights she wakes up with a start and gapes up at the wild darkness between the stars. The emptiness is familiar to her and she wants to know why, but the things inside her head push her away, warning her not to look too closely.

Ignore it, they say. Like all those other things.

She tries to listen, but it is beginning to fuck up her ability to work smoothly. Her stumbling is obvious, and she can feel how much her mind needs rest. At times her tongue feels heavy and thick, and she knows she had something to say, but can't remember what. Thoughts bounce around her head without logic, random and abrupt, causing obvious lulls in conversation. She is sure others are beginning to notice.

In all actuality, Kisame and Zabuza have been watching from the first time her muffled intake of breath woke them. After only two weeks of hard travel the girl had shot up, out of Zabuza's grasp, and craned her head back to stare at the sky, eyes blank. Kisame, who had been on watch, had locked his eyes on her mute form and even Zabuza had seemed a bit stunned.

It was eerie, the way she would sit so still and stare at the sky.

They watch the bags that grow under her eyes and the way her mind begins to drift more and more. They way that sometimes, she will stare at the darkness around them and curl in on herself, her usual loud voice silent and her dark eyes empty. Physically, she seems no

more exhausted than the rest of the squad, who is weary from back to back missions. Yet, there is something distinctly... *off* .

They do not know what to think, and it is only at nights, so they say nothing and pretend not to know. They all have a job to do.

They travel until they come upon the farthest outpost to the north, a tiny island that could claim only one building to its name. As far as she knows, no one had been to this outpost since a little after the founding of Kirigakure itself, so she had no idea why they needed to check it now of all times. Well, blow back shinobi from the frontlines in Iwa and Kumo could use it, she supposed. Yet, they could also just not. That would make her job much easier. Everyone endorsing this war could also go blow themselves, because they were dirty douchebags. Especially the shitty Kage and daimyo. Man, *fuck* them.

Ryuishi rubs her eyes with the back of her hand, staring at the blurry image of an ominous rocky island. The lack of sleep is starting to make her a real bitch, she thinks to herself.

The squad is quiet as usual as they progress forward, and for once, she thinks it is totally called for. This island reminds her of the Silent Hill games she used to play, all fog and sharp slate. It's creepy as fuck. Looking around the group, she can tell they feel the same.

The walking arsenal has his eyes narrowed in that weird way she has come to understand means he is funneling chakra to his eyes, and Suikami has them positioned in the back again, as if expecting danger.

The squad moves cautiously forward, carefully attempting not to shift the rocks under their feet or breath to loud. Ten pairs of eyes make constant sweeps around the environment, searching for anything out of place. Nothing is. Not even the shitty, run down, woodsy ass outpost, and wow she is not looking forward to spending the night here. The building looks like the type of murder shack you would find in a B-movie horror flick, with peeling wood paneling and cracked stone walls. The windows are barred and the second story looks like

it's about to collapse. She is half expecting a man in a hockey mask to greet them before she remembers that chainsaws do not exist in this world. The thought bums her out even further because chainsaw wielding ninja would be metal as fuck. Maybe someone could put kunai on a chain and spin it around real fast?

God, she needs some sleep.

Suikami holds up a fist, and the squad freezes behind him. He motions the trap squad upfront and directs them inside the outpost with a few gesture and a pointed finger. They enter and the rest of the squad waits in silence while they disarm some of the pitfalls that would have awaited them inside.

Ten minutes later, the orange haired chunin pokes his head outside and gives them the okay, and Ryuishi follows the lead of her boys and enters the murder shack, shaking and shivering from the cold. Almost immediately her unit begins to separate from the others, heading towards a darkened corner on the first floor. From there they will be able to keep a wall at their backs and their eyes on the entrances, which is helpful when their turn for watch comes up.

Ryuishi hunches down to yanki squat and hangs her head between her legs. She wants a cigarettes, even though she has never smoked in this body. It might help her mind wake up and raise her blood pressure a little. Doesn't matter if she's seven and it will ruin her lungs and cost her buttloads of money over the years. She just wants the comforting weight hanging off her lips and the acidic taste of smoke in her mouth.

"You look like you're taking a shit."

Ryuishi turns her head to squint up at Kisame. "You look like a piece of shit," she snarks back.

"And yet I still look better than you."

She sighs and hangs her head back down, closing her eyes and submerging herself in her tiredness. It becomes a bit harder to balance and she sways on her feet a bit but she manages to remain on her feet and not her ass, so she counts it as a success.

"You're totally right. I don't think I manage the dirty traveler look as well as you. But I bet you'll never look as good in a skirt as me."

Kisame snorts and sets his pack down next to hers before sliding down against the wall. Zabuza brings up the rear and plops down behind her, already digging through her bag for their meal. That boy could really care less as long as he gets fed. He doesn't look near as tired as the rest of them, the brat.

The bandage-faced brat manages to discover the side pocket on the inside of the bag and digs around inside of it until he finds whatever he is looking for. It turns out to be some of the cuttlefish jerky that the two boys enjoy, and he hands a fistful to Kisame and her without words while noticeably keeping the largest amount of meat.

Ryuishi gives him a pointed glare that he pretends not to notice. She groans and shifts her weight, letting her butt finally connect with the cold ground before twisting and reaching in the same pocket.

"Dammit Zabuza, people can't survive on protein alone, you ass."

"Says you," he grunts out, sweeping his eyes around the rest of the squads.

She pulls out the bag of mixed dried fruit and dutifully pours some into an outstretched blue hand before taking some for herself. Zabuza scoots away, anticipating the upcoming confrontation. Finishing up her portion, she slowly turns her eyes on the boy and begins their nightly ritual.

"Zabuza, eat your fruit," she orders, pulling another handful out of the bag.

He glares at her and Kisame sighs, exasperated. One by one the rest of the units in their squad turn their eyes on the trio to watch their evening entertainment. A few might even be gambling on the outcome of tonight's squabble.

"No."

She shifts closer and shoves the fist full of fruit under his nose, scowling when he turns his head to the side and purses his lips together.

"Zabuza. Second warning. Eat. Your. Fucking. Fruit."

Wisely remembering the incident last week, he shakes his head instead of answering.

Ryuishi narrows her eyes and advances on him. "Last chance, buttnugget, you better take it."

He still does not comply.

Ryuishi lunges and scrabbles for his face with one hand while attempting to dodge his fists. The boy really should just listen to her; it would be much easier for him. A balanced diet is essential in growing children and the amount of protein he consumes on not only deplete her rations faster than necessary, but also leaves little for her and Kisame. Mostly though, she thinks the mooch could at least pitch in if he wanted more meat, but whenever she tries to ask him, he is nowhere to be found. The douchebag seems to have developed a sixth sense when it comes to avoiding her nagging him about pooling cash. To bad that sense isn't there to help him avoid her forcing healthy(ish) eating habits on him though.

Tonight seems to be a bad one for their antics though, because she can hear Suikami groaning from where he stands, and she can feel the moment his disapproving gaze lands on them.

"Just eat the fruit kid, so we can get some silence fro-"

There is a line of red beading around Suikami's throat and the room goes very still, every breath held. Ryuishi watches in horror from her place next to Zabuzza, and the light inside her field commander's eyes flickers and dims as the red line grows thicker. She feels that hollow, empty sensation, and finally knows why it is so familiar.

His head tilts forward, away from his body, off of his neck, and tumbles to the ground in a wet cracking sound. Arterial spray spurts out like a morbid fountain in rhythmic thumps.

The room bursts into action.

Behind her she can hear Kisame, already on his feet, barking orders at the two of them, setting them up in a wedge formation around him. Her body follows on autopilot and all the weariness drains away from her in a burst of adrenaline, but her mind is far, far away.

Her heartbeat is a steady, sluggish thump inside of her chest and her head is wrapped in a fog, but her eyes are unusually sharp and her reflexes keen. Another inside her has recognized the danger and taken the helm.

The trio huddles back to back as Kumo nin surround the squad and bottleneck them through the door, and one of the genin trap specialists tries to bolt, only to be cut down by a lightning jutsu. The chunin gathers the last close, but she can see a unit of enemies break off from the main group and flank them. They are not combat specialists, and they will not last long.

She doesn't know how many there are or what kind of specialties they have, she only knows that it is her unit's job to keep this outpost and protect the rest of squad from these ambushers, but it is not so easy.

They are outranked and outnumbered, and she isn't even sure if they will survive.

There is chaos as she and Zabuza follow Kisame's lead, aggressively making their way toward the long range unit near the window. If they can regroup, if they can just regroup-

A flash of bright light and a spray of kunai distracts the opponent that attempted to rush Kisame from behind long enough for Zabuza to cut him down, and she feels a hungry vacuum sucking him away. She wishes she didn't know, didn't remember, she wants to *forgetforgetforget* . If she does not acknowledge it, it will not be real. She has opened a door she cannot close again.

The group surges forward and the wall in front of them explodes, giving way to a steep slate cliffside and a precipitous drop into the open ocean. The walking arsenal leaps through the hole he has just created without a thought and his team follows behind him. Kisame pierces the woman in front of him with his sword and kicks her off the ends of the blade.

"Cover!" he shouts, and the three move as one, trusting in their chunin leader. Ryuishi sweeps wide with a swing of her meteor hammer, forcing the enemies to give them room and giving Zabuza enough time to flash through hand signs and fill the area with thick, heavy fog. Something grabs the back of the children's arms, and she almost tries to stab at them, but then they are rushing through the air, held tight in their leader's hands.

She can see Kumo nin pouring out of the opening after them, using chakra covered feet to run down the cliffs. They swarm out. Like ants, she thinks, disgusting, many legged, ants. She feels two more hollow shivers snake through her, and knows the trap specialists are no more. There is a lack of sound, and she can hear something begin to cry out.

The trio splash down, and the cold saltwater swallows them.

The boys desperately swim to the surface, causing rushes of bubbles and froth. She can see them coating their hands and feet in chakra to climb out. She can feel Zabuza's demonic chakra

gathering around him and the pressure exerted by the sheer size of Kisame's coils being activated. Her own chakra is unnoticeable, hidden by these two these giants, and she slides her Gills out of her pocket and into her mouth. The will fight on the surface, and she will strike from the sea.

The Kumo ninja descend upon them and the air is filled with the sound of metal and jutsu.

To their left, the walking arsenal shouts something that becomes garbled and warped under the waves as the enemies surround him. They pace around him, circling him and his students. She can see the ripples that come from the rain of kunai and senbon, and she is impressed by the sheer amount of them entering the water, but she knows that they cannot last. One of his students breaks ranks and makes a run for it, trying to disappear in the mist.

She does not blame him for his cowardice. She wishes she could do the same.

More shouting from the man, and the ninja around him pounce. She sees them go down from the corner of her eye as she casts a nightmarish genjutsu on Kisame's opponent. Then she sees the ball of fire erupt from the pile, and she can feel the explosion's shock waves warp the liquid around her.

Only her unit remains.

So many deaths on the this little island, so close together. It saps her fire and drowns her strength, and the sting of the endless and eternal is swallowing her whole. The vacuum is calling out with its hollow, soundless voice and digging its numbing claws into her soul. It is dragging the tendrils of itself that she kept with her, always and forever, up to the surface and clenching them tight around her being.

Remember me, it intones, *Remember my touch, my taste, my sound*
. Remember being nothing .

Remember the Void.

She hadn't known that it would be like this, that she would feel it. That she would sense the savage hunger rip them from their bodies. Now...

Ryuishi can barely hold on, barely feel who she is. That ember she had clung so tightly to inside the nothingness is dimming and fading, heeding to the call of the Void. Somewhere, something inside of her is screaming endlessly at the dark. That angry, thrashing, roaring part of her is standing between the emptiness and her, lashing out and cutting. She only can remember faces, half remembered features that flash in and out of her head.

A smirk full of teeth like knives, a manic grin hidden behind white bandages. A smiling face with a dusting of freckles and curly brown hair.

Save them, love them, protect them.

Protect Protect Protect.

Ryuishi moves through the salty water like a snake, twisting and whirling soundlessly beneath the waves. The muted ringing of metal on metal travels down from above, and bright red light burns for a moment, casting scarlet shadows into her world. She feels the cold wash of water around her, insulating her from the battle. The silhouettes of feet stand out above her, moving to an age old dance that sings of rages and violence.

She twists, and there is the muffled sound of clinking as her chain moves, it's weight offsetting her buoyancy for a single half second before she can right herself. Her tiny wrists are wrapped tight by the links, and bladed ends of her weapon lie just below her hands. Little fingers move with surprising quickness, molding chakra in her gut, then her hands, then to the body above.

Above her, a foot misses its step, faltering in the chaotic dance, and the water is blooming with a fresh splash of red. A body lands, and the ocean carries it, a dead, gaping face staring down at her from up high, judging her. She feels him go, feels the Void swallow him.

Two pairs of sandaled feet move, and she follows them, tearing her gaze away from the abyss that watches her through the corpse's eyes.

Already the feet are joined by more. Panic explodes in her heart. Behind them is a ghost, whose footsteps do not even ripple the water, and her chakra is running low, drained from the back to back missions. Desperation sings inside her and the ember of her soul glows brighter, fighting off the numbness.

She kicks her feet and grabs the end of her chain, exploding out of the surf like a missile. Her legs tuck tight to her chest and she plants her feet on the woman's torso with a snarl on her face. She can see the Kumo woman's surprise, her shock, just moments before her blade bites deep into the concave of her collar, plunging down into her heart. She feels the body shudder as her teeth sink into her soft neck. The woman falls back, and they both splash down below the surface once more.

Ryuishi never notices the bite of a kunai in her back.

More and more are converging, and she isn't as effective as she needs to be. She needs more. She needs it all, everything she has to give, just to stay alive. Find her boys, guard their backs, tear apart the intruders.

She climbs on the surface, hands chakra coated and grasping the rolling waves, her long bangs dripping and hanging limp around her face. Her heart sings for carnage, for retribution. There is venom in her eyes and ruin on her tongue. The thrashing, nameless beast inside her howls, and she lets the sound tear through the air.

Two identical roars sound behind her, and together, they scream in negation, in bloodlust and desperation.

No, they will not submit. Not here, not now. You cannot take them .

Chains rattle to life and whirl in the air around her, a low hum filtering through the sounds of oblivion and battle. Another fire jutsu paints the world in bright oranges and reds, and the heat of it raises steam from the water below, but a funneling serpent of saltwater drowns it and pummels the Kumo shinobi down to the water. Her teammate with the manic grin is on them in seconds, carving flesh from bone in deft strokes of a steel blade.

Another, older man takes in the floating body of a comrade, and the disappearance of a woman. She sees the realization as he meets her eyes, the disbelief that a genin could do this. That a child could kill so cruelly. She laughs, broken and loud, in his stupid, smiling face. They are not ambushing children anymore. They already killed the ones this team had. There are no more people left alive on her squad.

Her unit is made of monsters, and they are going to eat these Kumo nin alive.

He seems to know that now, looking at her soaking wet and bloodstained figure. She rushes him, chain lashing out like a claw. He blocks it, but she expected him to. He cannot block the spray of salty water she kicks into the air and soaks him with to sting his eyes and blur his vision. People rely too much on their eyes.

She is going to pluck his from his skull.

Heartbeats and the tell tale crackle of a lightning jutsu gathering in his palms, one that will cut right through her and the shark beast behind her. She reaches out a fist behind her and tugs the boy's pants legs and they drop, letting go of the chakra beneath their feet. The ocean swallows them, and already she can feel her pack mate moving back towards his prey. She darts off under hers just as blue

streaks through the air above them and even under the water she can feel the hair on her arm raise. She lets a loop of chain trail behind her and propels herself out of the water once more, behind the scowling man. He turns and strikes out, but not down. She is short, and he is already dead.

The loop of chain rises with her and she tugs back hard on the ends of it, the length of metal catching him in the backs of his knees, tumbling him down. He isn't even in the water before she is on top of him, using the sharp weighted blades to cut up his face. He shrieks, loud and high, and she roars in his face as they go under the brine. His hands scrabble against the skin of her arms and his dig furrows deep into her flesh, but she cannot feel it. Her blood is singing, urging her on, and neither these gashes nor the knife in her ribs can stop her. She follows the weight of the chains down until he is no longer moving.

She makes sure to gouge out both his pretty, pretty amber eyes before she surfaces.

The air is misty and cold on her upper body, and as she whirls her head she sees her teammate with the snarling, manic grin scanning the mist for her. He finds her in the chaos and together they look towards their leader, who is still struggling with his prey. On impulse she flings her honey colored prize at the duo, but her aim does not strike true. Instead the amber orbs bounce off the chunin boy's chest and into the enemy, who catches sight of them and freezes. She hears them whisper a name and cackles because the man is gone, just like her squad, and can't hear the words so far beneath the waters surface.

Kisame takes the opening provided and drags his blade across their neck and the body falls comically slow. Blood mixes like ink in the water, and it highlights the slowly sinking spheres.

The blue man looks around them and locks eyes with his two genin. She sees the passion inside them, the surety and honest dedication behind the monsters mask.

She would follow this boy into hell.

His hand flashes to his mouth and slams against the surface of the waves. Smoke joins with mist and more numbers have been added to the hunting party.

"Ryuishi, you work with my summons and take them out from below. Stay close." he orders, swiping his blade downward through the air, sending more crimson droplets into the brine. "Zabuza, back to back. I want a rotating column formation."

The spiky haired boy grunts out in affirmation and jogs back to the blue boy's side, limping a little. When he draws close enough she spots a mass of burned flesh on his calf that makes her rage solidify into something deadly. Around her the shark summons are already circling anxiously, excited by the bloody waters. One of them swims off, scroll in its mouth, a last ditch effort to call for help. Snarling around her Gills, she joins the gigantic predators underwater and circles the two.

The fight goes on.

The unit moves like the tide, unrelenting and powerful. Each push forward brings them against more and more opponents, and they must step back. Kisame takes a stab to his shoulder before she can upset the balance of his opponent, and Zabuza seems to be littered with more and more bruises and burns as time goes on, but like her own with wounds, the two seemed to be too flooded with adrenaline to feel injuries.

She does not know how long this feeding frenzy lasts, because time means nothing to her in this state. It could have been minutes or hours, but all she knows is anger and desperation. All that floods through her is the fierce desire to protect her unit and avenge her squad. Lightning and water fill the night, and the sound of ringing steel sounds out through the heavy mists. It seems that no matter how many they take down, more come to take their place. Ryuishi heads the sharks behind her, flowing through the brine with ease,

and Kisame and Zabuza continue to gain ground, step by step, sword swing by sword swing.

She does not remember the night ever finishing up, or the last person she kills. She does not remember Kisame's fierce roar or Zabuza's victorious cries.

What she remembers feeling is the weight of the world finally coming down on her shoulders, and the fogginess in her head growing thick and heavy. Ryuishi can vaguely recall the absolute deadness in her limbs and the screeching agony of saltwater in the gashes on her arms and the kunia stuck in her ribs.

She remembers not being able to crawl back out of the water, being so dizzy and hurt. She knows she tried to solidify chakra on her hands, but her chakra system had shrieked at her and sent needles and glass through her coils. Her eight gates had howled in protest and her arm had slipped right through the waves. Kisame and Zabuza, the chakra monsters that they are, had stumbled ahead of her while she gave up and let the tide carry her toward the small, rocky shore.

She remembers her heavy lids and the feeling of the ocean rocking her back and forth, the last touch of the summon's sandpaper skin against her hand before the water turned smoky.

Ryuishi knows that somehow she reached land, and the other two must have dragged her worn out seven year old body with them. She remembers the jagged stones catching on her soaking pants and the dulled rush of pain when one of them tore the kunai from her back and somebody tugging her shirt off to wrap her ribs and arms.

She remembers being cold, so, so cold, her fire gone and the Void calling out from all around her. Her breath coming shallow and quick, her mind heavy and confused. She remembers looking into the abyss around her, the one that cradled her for so long.

She remembers telling it, *Not yet. Not so soon* .

The next morning the trio never notices a three man unit making their way through the heavy mists. Zabuza never sees their expression turn grim as they see the floating, dismembered corpses that wear both Kumo and Kiri headbands. Kisame never spots them huddle together to whisper about how none from a logistics squad could have survived such an ambush. Ryuishi never spies their morbid expectations be broken as they find three children, sloppily bandaged and wounded, piled together, sleeping as if they had just eaten too big of a meal instead of fought their way out of hell. One of the unit shifts his stance and the sound of stones knocking together causes the one to finally wake.

Small, bleary eyes blink open and a hand grips tight on a sword. A predators smile stretches across blue cheeks.

"You're late." he rasps out, and two more sets of eyes squint open at the sound of his voice.

The jonin leader of the team shivers at the sight of those keen eyes, so bright and intent after such a vicious battle. *These are not children*, he thinks, *these are monsters* .

The Kirigakure no Kaijuu are born.

AN: The first real battle! Ambushed by Kumo nin and the last survivors, the monsters of the mist make their debut! Here we begin to see a bit of team dynamics again, the exasperated leader Kisame, the antisocial and domineering Zabuza and the creepy little shit Ryuishi.

A big shout out to all of my reviewers, without whom I would lose hope with. Another shout out for all the lurkers who read, favorite and follow. I love you all.

The biggest hug to my lovely beta Enbi, who also has some great stories. She makes my work readable and helps me keep

track of events I have planned so that you guys don't have to read a jumbled mess of shit. Seriously, I work them way to hard.

Meeting Medical leave

I do not own Naruto.

Leaning back against the obscenely decadent cushion of a certain chunin's bed, Ryuishi sighs. Her ribs hurt like a motherfucker, the bandages that circle her arms are itchy and stiff, but for the love of all that is righteous and holy, it is a bed. A real, honest to god bed, with a mattress and pillows and comforters and everything. She lets her head fall back against a cushion that must have cost at *least* a few missions pay and groans out in comfort.

"What are you doing?" asks a bland, rough voice from her left.

She looks over at the boy squished into her side, his broken and burned leg propped up in a cast beside her own, and gives him a contented smile. "A bed, Zabuza," she sighs out again.

"You have said that four times already," he tells her.

She rolls her eyes, smile still on her face, and ignores him as he shifts to face her right. Sitting up against a wall, shoulder and torso wrapped, is Kisame. An eyebrow is raised high on his brow as he looks at the two children who have come in uninvited and piled into his bed.

"A bed, Kisame. A real bed."

"I know. It's my bed," he says dryly.

She looks up at him with half lidded eyes, her hand poking out of the thick grey comforter to rest on his knee.

"Marry me," she tells him seriously.

She feels a jump to her left as Zabuza starts at the words. Probably because he doesn't understand human interaction, or jokes.

Kisame simply raises his other eyebrow. "Why would I ever do that?"

"So that your bed can become our bed."

"I have a bed," Zabuza's voice blurts out.

Kisame snorts and shoves her hand off of his knee, his look changing into one of fond exasperation. "No."

She covers her eyes with the now free hand and lets out a dramatic huff. "You're right. We're all too young. I am only seven, Zabuza is only ten, and you are fifteen. Wait for me, my bed."

"I'm eleven," he drawls out.

Her coal eyes open, and she cocks her head to look at him again, her arm dropping to the side. Suddenly, her every action seems inappropriate to the extreme. Her heartbeat picks up. "Seriously?"

"Yes."

"O-Oh. Oh fuck. Shit."

Both her hands come to cover eyes and she breathes deeply a few times, lying flat on her back. "Zabuza.... how old are you?" she asks quietly.

"Nine," he grunts out.

A strangled, high pitched whine escapes her throat and she digs her palms deeper into her eyes. "I'm an awful person. A child abuser. A horrible adult."

Kisame looks at the girl, who is definitely not an adult. She looks like she is undergoing extreme emotional duress. He observes her for a

moment as she mumbles under her breath and then locks his eyes with the boy on her other side. The spiky haired child shrugs at him.

"Ryuishi... are you okay?" Kisame asks slowly.

The girl in front of him sniffs, and oh shit, he thinks she might be crying. This can't be good.

"I... I told you like, a thousand dirty jokes," she whispers.

The boys look at each other again.

"I told you," she inhales sharply, "... I said stuff about boners. I thought you'd understand."

Kisame tells her, "I do understand."

"I don't," comes Zabuza's reply.

She sniffs again and something wet leaks out of her covered eyes. "I just asked you to marry me so we could share a bed."

"And I said no."

"I'm a pedophile," she answers, seeming aghast.

"You're seven. You can't be a pedophile."

Ryuishi whimpers and sniffs again. Kisame and Zabuza sit stock still, discomfited by the sound of her crying. The two look at each other, as if one of them will hold the answer to this problem. Both of them look distinctly uncomfortable, fidgeting in their spots as the tears continue.

Gently, making sure his movement is unnoticed by the girl, Kisame bring his hands up from the sheets and into view of the other boy. Surely, since Zabuza went to the academy with her, he will know what to do, right? His hands flash through some signs, asking the

other child that same question. The other boy shakes his head in negation. Of course not, that brat was awful with social interaction.

How attack?, Kisame signs, and he really doesn't think that they were designed for this purpose, but they will have to make do.

The boy makes an effort to think about it, that much he can see. For a few moments he looks stumped, but then brightens and makes a few hand gestures that he is sure aren't Kiri sign standard. In fact, he thinks it's that awful sign language that Ryuishi taught him, the one he sees whores using. If he's right, then that kind of 'happy ending' is not going to work at all.

Negative, he signs back, eyes judging. He doesn't even think Zabuza knows what he just said.

Zabuza scowls and looks like he's thinking some more. The younger boy's brown eyes examine the girl before them before drifting back up to his meet his own. He shrugs again.

Useless little brat, Kisame thinks unkindly. He wishes this type of stuff was covered by his shishou. That would be helpful.

Okay, what had he seen parents do to children who cried? Sometimes they would smack then, but that seemed to be for a different kind of crying. Maybe... hugs? Was that it? He hoped so. He attempts to improvise a sign for this, and Zabuza looks at him blankly before copying the gesture. It looks a little like the signal for incapacitate, but surely he knows the difference. Kisame signs it once more and nods his head in affirmation.

Zabuza's hands stretch out towards Ryuishi's vulnerable neck.

Kisame starts and reaches out to push him back from their teammate, a scowl on his face. Is this kid mentally deficient? For Kiri's sake, he hopes not, but it isn't looking good.

Zabuza looks up at him, bewildered. It had seemed to him they had found a solution. A little rougher than some liked to approach things, he supposed, but he thought he had it right. Apparently not.

The two boys lean back and look at each other again, lost.

Carefully, as if considering the things that Ryuishi seems to enjoy, Zabuza lifts up his hand. He signs, *Rations?* And yes, of course! How could Kisame not see it before? Ryuishi seems to enjoy food, and she can't mumble and sniffle around dumplings. Hell, he's sure he might have seen some of those parents in the market district hand sweets over to their children to keep them quiet. He nods an affirmative over at Zabuza, who looks unduly pleased that his answer is correct. Of *course* he knew how to make his tool stop blubbering. It was his tool.

(If this answer hadn't worked, he would have tried the pillow thing.)

"We should eat," Zabuza grunts out. Kisame facepalms, wishing the other boy could have put it a little less bluntly.

Between them, the weeping figure of a little girl sniffles and rubs her eyes. When she speaks, her voice is watery and the husky tone of it sounds thick and wet. "S-Shuumai," she chokes out.

Kisame raises his head from his hand and blinks. Seriously? That glaringly obvious change of subject worked?

Zabuza nods across from him, his brown eyes flashing seriously. "Seafood sukiyaki," he adds, and the chunin is becoming more and more sure that the only reason he suggested food in the first place is because he is hungry.

Ryuishi drops her hands from her face and looks up at them from beneath her lashes with red rimmed eyes. Her dark orbs are wide and pleading, and he doesn't think the small animal look is a good one for her.

"Carry me?"

"No."

Somehow the trio find themselves in some back alley establishment located in the market district. Kisame would be hesitant to call it a restaurant, but it is warm, if not a little dirty, and the air smells divine.

The dark haired young teen behind the counter scowls when they walk in, and Kisame thinks the dragon tattoo that peeks out from underneath his top seems suspicious, but when his eyes alight on the form of the young girl in their company, his eyes seem to soften. He fingers a fishtooth earring hanging by his neck and welcomes them in. They seat themselves in a booth and are treated to some unexpectedly prompt services, and soon enough the man himself is taking their orders. The boys seem ignorant to the way her eyes light up in recognition when she spots him, and the subtle nod they share.

It seems like Hanako and the nameless are doing just fine.

Soon the table in front of them is laden with several different steam plates and two large bowls of hot soup. As Kisame digs in he spies a large shrimp ball in his broth, which reminds him of something he had been wanting to ask.

"Ryuishi?"

"Wahrh?" she mumbles around a mouthful of dumpling.

"Did you throw a pair of eyes at me during that fight?"

Instinctively, she blushes. Ah, yes, that. She was kinda out of her head at that point, and she really doesn't want to talk about the fucked up things that went on. The loss of her squad haunts her in a way that she doesn't see on the boys with her, and she really really lost it at that point. What scares her more is the way she views her actions, with a distant sort of apathy, a hollowness that reeks of the

empty and eternal. She wants to repress the whole thing. Actually, she wants to repress a large majority of her memories at this point.

She swallows her food and lifts her hand to rub underneath her nose. "Maybe?"

Zabuza seems to have an unhealthily strong interest in the subject, and his face betrays a sense of unholy glee at the prospect of talking about it. "You did. I watched."

"I really don't think-"

"It was very effective, and one of them started crying when they saw them."

Ryuishi cringes back against the booth. She remembers that. One of them had even whispered a name she should probably remember. She feels like that whoever that man was, he was well respected and loved. Dick move on her part.

"Removing recognizable features and using them against an opponent seems a very efficient method of causing dissent among the ranks."

She winces.

Kisame turns to glare at her, his thin lips downturned. She wilts under the force of his gaze, attempting to make herself as small as a target as possible.

"If he starts maiming corpses, I am going to end you," he growls.

Indignant, she huffs. Like she can stop whatever Zabuza does. The boy is too strong willed, and frankly, as long as he is focusing on enemies and not just people in general, then he has surpassed all her expectations. Already he is far above what she could have hoped for. Sometimes, he even tries to comfort her! That's a motherfucking miracle right there!

"Whatever," she grumbles.

"I'm serious. Everybody is going to think we're freaks."

"Boy, do I have some news for you my friend."

She's sure he would have swatted the back of her head for the sarcasm if his shoulder wasn't injured. By the looks of it, he is simply trying to cow her into submission with his eyes alone.

"What news?" Zabuza asks.

She shoves another dumpling in her mouth and sighs at the boy, pointing rudely at him with her chopsticks.

"The news that you don't know what a boner is." she answers. The spiky haired shinobi looks bewildered at the change of subject. Perversion aside, it is an important discussion that needs to be had. Zabuza is nine, and very close to some intense physical and mental changes, courtesy of nature. She turns toward her oddly colored companion and gives him a stern look.

"You should fix that," she orders.

Kisame slurps up a mouthful of noodles and raises his brow at her, chewing slowly. He swallows and points his own chopsticks at her. "You're the whore's daughter."

She gasps, and then immediately regrets it because it make her ribs sing with agony, but continues anyway. Such an insult deserves an immediate and dramatic response.

"Kisame! How dare you! Why, I never-" she huffs out, hand clasped over her heart. "My mother is a most respected entertainer! Why you would stoop to such insults when I simply asked you to help educate a fellow boy about the wonders of adolescence, I will never understand!"

Kisame shakes his head at her. "Not gonna happen."

"Come on!" she exclaims, her free hand drawing a line between the two, "You're a boy, he's a boy, it works!"

Zabuza simply watches the two, steadily consuming his meal. His eyes dart between them with interest, mildly curious to know about whatever they are speaking off. Is it a weapon, a secret technique? A boner sounds like a device, or a job title. Perhaps a boner is to bones what a fisher is to fish?

Kisame becomes more firm in his stance, sitting up as straight as he can, leaning imposingly over the girl. "I will not have this conversation with him, or anybody else, ever."

"Don't be like that! You both have swords, so its easier to hear it coming for you!"

Ah, so it has something to do with weaponry, Zabuza divines. Chewing on a piece of fish cake, he huddles down to his bowl. Perhaps it is a method of attack?

"Never."

"Well I'm not going to, so who?"

Kisame shrugs and goes back to eating, abandoning the conversation. "Fuguki-sama taught me. Isn't your master in town?"

"His master." Ryuishi grunts out, pursing her lips. Why didn't she think of that? Probably because she can't even remember that man's name, let alone wherever the fuck he is. Is he in town, who knows? Not her. Ever since she graduated, before the war, he seemed to spend more time ordering Zabuza to mash her into the ground. She knows the swordsman is trying to set her up as some sort of sacrifice to rid the boy of his last bit of humanity, just as he knows she is working towards the opposite. Bastard.

A brilliant idea crosses her mind and she turns to the spiky haired boy. "Zabuza, go to your shishou and ask him what a boner is after

lunch," she says, and that's that. Not only she not have to give the talk, but she got to throw that miserable scheming dick under the bus. Mentally she pats herself on the back.

Later that evening, she regrets her hasty congratulations.

Lying on Kisame's bed while he, presumably, takes a dump, she is once again comfortable. Two weeks of medical leave is going to be awesome. Nothing but lounging around and being a lazyass, her favorite hobby. True, she does have to keep up her stretches and light exercise, but compared to the constant travel and living under the threat of attack, it's basically heaven. She sighs contentedly and flips the page of her magazine.

The door to the room opens and she turns her head. Zabuza is standing there, stoic faced, more serious than she has ever seen him. He meets her eyes and she is stunned by the sincerity in them.

"Ryuishi," and wow, she thinks that might be the first time he has actually used her name, "Did we make a baby?"

She chokes on the spit in her mouth. From the bathroom she can hear the startled "WHAT?!" through the thin walls dividing them.

Startled, she sits up and, ignoring the pain in her ribs, just stares at him. "Why the fuck would you ever think that?" she demands.

Closing the door behind him, Zabuza treads carefully across the hard floor of the room, as if approaching a particularly pissed off animal. He may not be far from the truth.

"Shishou said that if you impaled a girl with your sword without protection, you create life."

She can hear cackling from the toilet, and dread fills her heart. That bastard didn't explain anything, did he?

"Zabuza... first of all, no, we didn't make a baby. That's not even-"

"I impaled you. Twice. Shishou said-"

There is loud guffawing from the restroom.

"Oh for shit's sake! That's not-! I don't even-!" she flails her arms, rushing to get the words out. She draws a deep breath to calm her thoughts.

"Zabuza, your master did not mean that sword," she tells him calmly.

"Which sword does he mean then?"

Looking to the heavens that she cannot see, Ryuishi prays for the patience she will need to explain this, and the strength not to attempt to poison a legendary swordsman.

"The one in your pants," she grits out between clenched teeth.

"I carry my sword on my back," he tells her seriously, edging towards the foot of the bed. From the restroom she can hear snickers.

She attempts to stall and shouts at the closed door. "Kisame, get out here already and help!" she screeches.

"No can do, it's gonna be a long one. I can already tell," comes the muffled reply, and man, she really, really wishes that the thought of the chunin being constipated was funny enough to distract her from the dread she is feeling. She doesn't want to do this. She avoided young children in her past life for a reason. This wasn't in her job description. Get a new life, help some orphans, befriend some pariahs, eat food, fight in a war, all are things she can do. This is like taking the Ninetails on by herself.

Yet, if she doesn't explain this, Zabuza grows up with a vague description of what is coming and makes dumb decisions. Puberty will slap him in the face like a frozen fish, and everybody around him will have to live with his aggressive naivety. She has a responsibility

here to educate a wayward child and clear up many misconceptions. She can do this. Breathing deep, she steels herself.

"Zabuza, sit down," she tells him, and he balks at the order for a moment before sitting down at the foot of the bed.

"Do you know what I mean when I say the sword in your pants?" she asks again, and he firmly shakes his head no. She can do this, she can be super serious about a very serious matter.

"I mean your penis." she tells him, and shit, the very word makes her want to giggle.

He grunts and looks away, not meeting her eyes. She wants to do the same.

"As you grow up, many changes will occur in your body. This process is called puberty, and is perfectly natural," she tells him, balling her fists and powering through.

"Around the ages of nine and thirteen, the human body begins releasing things called hormones into the body, signaling the beginning of sexual maturity. In the case of boys, they will cause muscle and hair growth in various place. The penis and testicles will also grow, and voice changes are expected to occur as well," she grits out through clenched teeth, and Zabuza looks like he has just had an epiphany of some sort. She really doesn't want to know. At all.

"Alongside these physical changes, there are mental and emotional changes as well. The most obvious can be the development of a sexual drive. You may begin to look at other people, be they boys or girls, and feel things. You may not. It is just a common factor, and attraction can sometimes not be hindered by gender. There are some unspoken rules, but they generally boil down to consensual, of age, and safe."

"What's this have to do with swords?" Zabuza interjects, and she bites her lip and breathes out, clasping her hands together in front of her face. Closing her eyes, she answers him.

"The sword was a euphemism for a penis, Zabuza," she breathes out.

He grunts and crosses his arms. "I don't think you can stab somebody with that."

She lets out a slight laugh, because *oh yes you can*. She has memories of it for proof.

"The act is not an actual attempt to injure someone, rather to er... uh. Hang on. Let me think of a good metaphor. While I do, please take the time to ensure that sex and violence are in separate parts of your brain. Please don't equate them."

Pausing for thought she places her head in her hand. How did she get here? How did she come to a point in her life where she is explaining such things to a little psychopath? Why is Kisame taking so long to poop? She bets he's just in there doing nothing, too afraid to come out. She bets he doesn't even know anything on the subject. What is her life even-?

Zabuza kicks his legs a bit and stares at the wall behind her.

"Okay, so, boys are born with swords-"

"You mean penises, right?" he interrupts.

She sighs. "Yes, penises. Males are born with penises, which I will call swords, and Females are born with sheaths, which are actually called vaginas, but I will call sheaths. Biologically, this is the inherent difference between sexes, which is different from gender, but I'm not even going to touch on that right now." she tells him, wagging her hand in the air, "And to create a child, a sword must be placed inside a sheath."

"A penis must be put inside a vagin-"

"ALRIGHTY THEN! I can see that metaphors aren't going to work for you," she says, clamping her hand over his mouth. Her glares at her from behind her palm.

"Put the penis inside the vagina and the act is called sex. It how babies are made. Sometimes people call other things sex, and there is a ton of variation, blahblahblah, I am so done with this conversation," she grits out, sliding down from her place on the bed.

Zabuza stares at her as she stiffly walks away, back straight. Her eyes never leave the door, and when she opens it, she pauses.

"Tomorrow morning there will be letters under your door explaining things out. Until then, do not show me your faces. I'm going to sleep in my own bed, and try to forget that puberty is quickly approaching us all," she says stoically, still not facing him. "Also, Kisame is dead to me." Then she walks out, slamming the door behind her.

There is the sound of flushing and then rushing water and a blue head pokes outside the bathroom.

"Hey, can I read the letter after you?"

AN: Here we see some of Ryuishi's actual personality shine through! I want her to be this nonsensical, sarcastic, douchebaggy girl but she has to filter through some shit first. Character development and all that. Also, this may seem OOC for the boys, but please remember that they are in fact just that, boys. They are kids who can act like adults but are very much children on the borders of puberty, curious about the world and their own bodies and what not.

A side note, Ryuishi doesn't handle embarrassment very well. She likes to transmute it into aggression. Also, this chapter started out because I fucked up the ages between them, and

wow, now Ryuishi is really bad at tell ages and this spiraled wildly out of control

A shout out to all my reviewers, and those lurkers who had the kindness and bravery to leave comments as well. I appreciate it all so much, you don't even know. Thank you to my readers and silent lurkers as well.

A lovely thank you to my beta Enbi who constantly deals with my shit and reminds me that humor exists in the world. She also helps me stay on track. Bless.

Stay tuned for more Kiri no Kaijuu sitcom humor.

Meeting your Chakra

I do not own Naruto.

A week into the scheduled three weeks of medical leave, Ryuishi is still content to do jack shit. She's actually pretty grateful the iryo-ninjutsu practitioners in the Mist are all kind of incompetent. She hasn't been able to be this lazy since she was a baby, and that was fucking ages ago. It's been work work work since she could walk, driven by her own curiosity and desire for strength, which sucked so many balls. First it was because she felt the need to help the nameless, then because someone had decided she should be a ninja or whatever, then because Zabuza was a troubled youth in need of guidance, then a motherfucking war. Now though, now she she can sit back, eat food, sleep in a bed, and not do anything.

Well, she *would* have been able to do nothing if two miniature shitbags hadn't decided that they still needed to train. Seriously, they had much better things to do. In fact, they could even do this: just leave her the fuck out of it.

"Seriously, leave me the fuck out of it," she mumbles, burying herself deeper under the covers.

One of them slaps her leg while another pulls the covers away. A classic flanking maneuver. The two have gotten too good at dragging her out of bed and they're stupidly efficient at it. She might have to kill them.

"Get up and get ready you lazy brat," growls out Kisame and Zabuza just hits her again. Why, that little- After all the things she's done for him! She wrote that letter by hand! With that pen she stole from that inn! She wasted ink on the ungrateful child!

She groans and flails around on the bed, a mimicry of throwing a fit. Kisame throws something that feels like clothes at her and she stops, pretending to die. He sighs in exasperation and she can feel the bastard rolling his eyes.

"Hurry up."

"Literally eat shit and cry. Both of you," she says, face stuffed in a pillow. With his unwounded arm Kisame slaps the back of her head, and sweet mother Theresa on a fire truck in a pin up calendar, that boy has a mean slap. She whimpers and clutches the area with her hands. She would curl into a ball, but her ribs still hurt.

"Why do I even hang out with you assholes?" she whines, glaring at them groggily. She wishes coffee was more popular in Kiri. Wait, would coffee affect her growth? Can she even drink coffee? Why wouldn't she be able to? What the fuck kind of thought was that?

Zabuza glares at her while Kisame stands over his shoulder doing the same. Both of them look like they are ready to beat the snot out of her if she doesn't get up. *Pushy fucking brats*, she thinks.

"Whatever," she grumbles in defeat, sliding towards the bathroom with the clothes that were thrown. She hopes they have fun stewing in impatience while she takes a luxuriously long shower and does her hair. She doesn't even care if she's seven and only going to train, she has a compulsive need to look nice and feel clean. Those mini douchebags can deal with the consequences of their life choices. Assholes.

Somehow, and really, she's not at all sure how, they wind up outside the village walls at the lake she had first swam in in the Academy. She's mildly hungry, a little pissed, and mostly bewildered.

"What?" she grumps out, arms crossed.

"I said we're practicing Nature Transformation. You don't know any," Kisame says, rolling his eyes. She eyes the exasperated boy, hand

on her hip, lips turned downward. Quirking an eyebrow, she gives the same dead look to Zabuza, who stands with his arm over a crutch, glaring at her. He looks angry, suspiciously angry.

"Look, I bet you don't even know what Nature you have. Zabuza and I had our teacher test us earlier on but you-" he coughs awkwardly. She narrows her eyes to shoot him a venomous look.

"If you woke me up to remind me that I am nowhere near as strong as you two, good job." she spits, grumpy from the cold and the reminder. Her blood is probably that of a civilian and a whore, which makes her childhood completely different than that of a shinobi's kid. She wasn't trained super young, she didn't get supervision, she wasn't even supposed to have ended up in the Academy. She is leaps and bounds behind two little boys, and it stings more than one would expect. The two of them were able to stay in shape on that battlefield when she had been run ragged. Then again, she is physically younger than the two so maybe it's not too bad.

Kisame glances at her and sighs. "You could have died. You got the most direct hit out of all of us," he tells her, and okay, she did. Any deeper and that kunai could have just as easily pierced her lung. So what? It could have been Kisame's back and she's done this whole living thing once already. These two punks haven't even begun to live, hell, they've barely hit puberty. They should be grateful!

"Doesn't matter," she grumbles out. And really, it kind of doesn't. The boys who stand before her are going to grow into men who are legends, breaking from the mold and reaching new heights. Zabuza saves a little kid and manages to seriously injure Hatake Kakashi and the Team Seven, who are crazy powerful. Kisame is going to become the most loyal person in history, someone capable of taking down tailed beasts by himself.

Watanabe Ryuishi is never mentioned in canon. There is no path for her to take, no legend to live up to. She doesn't really give a shit either. Taking on Team Seven sounds like a damn headache, and she's pretty sure a tailed beast would be able to atomize her with a

sneeze. That kind of shit sounds exhausting. All she wants to do is grow up a bit so she can eat good food, drink good booze, and have a lot of casual but mind blowing sex. It's pretty much the perfect setup.

Zabuza is glaring at her and she snaps back from her daydream, looking like she has said something awful. Kisame is sneering down at her contemptuously. What?

"I didn't know that you were made of such weak stuff," he tells her haughtily.

"What?" she asks, confused.

"Did you not just say it didn't matter if you died?"

"I don't know?"

Zabuza grunts and glares harder, a sneer obvious even with his bandage mask on and Kisame looks torn between wanting to scoff derisively or facepalm.

"Seriously, I'm not sure if I did or not," she tells them. She forgets things like that, meaningless words. She can remember what her middle school science book said on page 221 but she couldn't tell you what she ate yesterday for breakfast. "Wait, does this mean if I was suicidal you guys would act like this?" she asks, brows furrowed. "Because that's awful."

In reality, she is unsurprised that they would hold this kind of attitude. After all, Kiri really doesn't seem to be the type of place that would help those with depression, or any mental disorder at all actually. Still, these are her boys and they should know better.

"You guys are dicks," she scolds.

Kisame looks like he is confused by this whole conversation, and he can't decide if he wants to be indignant, haughty, or exasperated.

Zabuza just looks slightly less pissed.

"So you don't want to die?" he asks, and wow. Look at that. Zabuza is asking her about her mental state, and that has got to be a miracle. Her eyes feel a little wet, and pride wells within her heart. Not really, but it *is* nice that he seems to be changing just a little.

"Thank you for asking, Zabuza," she says, making sure to praise his success. "No, I don't want to die."

He grunts and looks as pleased as an incarnation of rage and destruction can look, which is pretty damn pleased, actually. Kisame sighs and looks towards the heavens, probably asking the Kami for strength.

"So what are we doing again?" she asks.

Kisame looks like he's having trouble keeping his shit together and the look he sends her is absolutely lethal. The grimace he sends her is less a disgusted expression than it is a warning signal.

"Nature. Transformation." he grits out, digging a piece of paper from his pocket and thrusting it at her. Sighing, she takes it and stares at it.

"Okay, so...?"

"Channel your chakra through it!" he snaps. "Are you an idiot?"

She shrugs. "Probably."

Inside, she's a little let down that chakra paper isn't more... unique. It just feels like a waxy version of watercolor paper. It's thick and rough against her fingertips, and she can see the fibers they used to make it even with her poor eyesight. Slowly, just to piss the boys off further, she pools the chakra in her gut, making sure to use an even mix of spiritual and physical energy, before letting the mixture creep up her arm into her hands.

The paper becomes soaked.

"Big surprise," she grunts, staring at the little off white sheet. Something else is pooling out on it, staining the threads. It's kind of hard to look at, and her eyes try to slide right off of it, like she isn't meant to see it, but it blooms like smoke onto the paper. Squinting, she tries to look closer at it, but it's kind of hard to conceive. It just looks like, well, nothing. It's like she knows something should be there, but she can't remember what it is supposed to be, or why, or how. There's no answers, there is just... a void.

The Void.

Ryuishi stops immediately, balling her hand into a fist around the paper, heart beating rapidly in her chest. That bullshit was in her chakra? Motherfucker! She had been casting genjutsu on people! Genjutsu, in which she forced *her chakra* into someone's brain in order to maintain an illusion! She was shoving death into people's heads! She was violently forcing them to experience absolute thought and sensory deprivation! Dammit dammit dammit-!

"So... water. Are we done now?" she asks in a drawl, looking back up at the boys, ignoring her surprise and fear. *Lie*, she tells herself, *lie with your body and your words, don't acknowledge anything*.

Kisame narrows his eyes at the hand clasped tight around the paper. He had been watching the whole thing, carefully observing her actions, only there had been something there. He didn't know what, but he had just felt compelled to look away, just for a second...

"Training," Zabuza grunts out, jerking his head toward the lake.

She give him a deadpan look slowly turning her head to glance at the large body of water, then back to him.

"Yah, I'm going to need a bit more than that," she tells him, stuffing her hands into her pockets, betraying nothing.

Kisame continues to eye her warily. He can feel there's something off with the whole situation, but no one else seems to notice. In fact, he seems to be the one acting odd.

He breathes out and motions for the other two to follow him, channeling chakra onto his feet and stepping onto the placid surface of the lake. They continue to do so until they reach a point that seems to be the middle, and Kisame whirls on her, boring his eyes into hers.

"Feel the water," he orders her.

Ryuishi removes a hand from her pocket and bends at the waist, dipping her fingers into the liquid. "Feels wet," she tells him, eyes meeting his.

His leg snaps out and he plants his dirty sandal in her face, making sure that some of the mud from the shore smears over her forehead as he kicks her. Ryuishi squawks and straightens, her now wet hand going up to cradle her nose and the other rising from her pocket to swipe at the mud. Her pretty, neat, up kept appearance!

Zabuza snickers at Kisame's side while he glares down at her, the traitor.

"Meditate and reach out with your chakra into the lake. Feel the water, become it. To manipulate an element, you first have to understand it. Then we can work on getting you to shape it to your will," he tells her.

"How about you suck my dick and I leave and get some goma wakame?" she hisses, blinking back tears from her eyes. That kick to her face could have crushed her skull, she knows that, but instead it got her right on the spot that makes you want to cry. Bastard has perfect aim.

Kisame's eyes flash and he looks like he's about to strike her again, but Zabuza interrupts. "Do you have a penis?"

She casts her watery gaze on him. "What? No," she answers, bewildered.

"Then how-" he begins, and Kisame looks like he is just so done with this whole situation.

He closes his eyes and pinches the bridge of his nose, breathing in slowly, ignoring their chatter. This was supposed to be a training session, to assist their teammate in getting stronger so she wouldn't get hurt as often. He had started out determined to set her on the right path, to fix all the weird habits that living as a civilian had given her, and bring them closer in terms of strength. So that what happened in the north could never happen again, and he and Zabuza wouldn't have to watch as somebody else carried her cold, limp body all the way to the hospital. So that he wouldn't have to see tan skin turn grey and hear her labored breaths. So that she would stop acting like she was stronger than she really was, and stop treating death as a joke.

The little girl in front of him had taken blows meant for boys more times than he was comfortable with. Blows that he and Zabuza could have taken with no trouble and kept moving. The kunai on their first mission was meant for him, and he would have caught it. Zabuza could have deflected everything hurled at him with ease. With bandits she took on attacks that she struggled with for seemingly no reason at all, just so they wouldn't have to.

That was a problem.

She couldn't take on their level of opponent with as much ease and her loyalty to them cost her. There was a price for her continuous intervention and it showed. There were scars that stretched out on her arms and legs, dark slivers and jagged lines that stood out against her skin. She paid in blood and pain and weeks of healing, something that the boys would not have had to deal with if they had just taken it themselves.

It wasn't that she didn't trust them, he knew that. He could see the way she acknowledged their strength, in her words and the way she would defer to them, but it was if she didn't want them to have to use that strength. Like she thought it was unfathomable that the two boys should have to do things themselves. More than anything, that loyalty and care bugged him. She was younger than them both and she consistently acted like she was an adult. Like she was their older sibling, always watching out for them. Ryuishi made sure they ate until they were full and distracted them when they felt the weight of war and battle. She gave them the least confusing explanation of puberty and sex he had ever heard, and she ate and drank and joked with them. She called them 'her boys', like they belonged there, with her. By her side, as she took care of them and cursed them in turns.

The fact that the same part of her that made sure he always got the shrimp filled onigiri would be the same part of her that would get her killed burned bright in his mind.

Confronting Zabuza, he had discovered that he was not alone in thinking these thoughts.

So, together, they had come up with a plan. They wouldn't stop her from her actions, because honestly, they liked it. It felt nice to be cared for, to have somebody remember your favorite foods and to joke around with at night. Instead, they would force her to get on their level, to fight like they did. To make her as strong as they were, so they wouldn't have to see her broken body ever again. Typically, they did not take her own opinion into consideration when they had created this scheme. Watching Zabuza and her wrestle on the water's surface, mindful of each others wounds, he regretted that. Ryuishi's brand of nonsense really complicated things.

Kisame calmly walked over toward the two, glaring at them like the children they were. The girl's teeth were sunk into Zabuza's forearm and the boy had his hands wrapped around her bangs.

"Break it up," he orders, nudging at them with the tip of his foot none too kindly, "You act like animals."

Scrambling apart, Ryuishi casts one last look at the spiky haired youth. "Yah, Zabuza. You dirty monkey," she hisses, clambering to hide behind Kisame.

"Better than a honking goose," he growls back.

Looking affronted, she goes to insult him again, but the words die on her lips. Kisame's good hand plants itself on her head and shoves down, forcing her to sit on top of the water.

"Meditate," he bites out, squeezing his fingers around her skull to drive in the point. Ryuishi sneers but crosses her legs anyway, folding herself effortlessly into a lotus position.

Breathing in and closing her eyes, she quiets her mind in much the same way she does every night before bed. Only, instead of running through memories of her past life she tries to clear her mind completely and focus on the lake beneath her.

Breathe in seven, hold four, breathe out seven. Repeat.

She has done this so many times that she can reach the state instinctively. Like swimming, her body knows the motions it needs to take, and her mind knows the paths to trace. The ones who dwell inside her head quiet themselves with her and focus, harmonizing together. They emerge from the corners of her mind, each one wildly different and exactly the same, converging on the liar's palace she has built herself in the center of her very soul.

Breathe in seven, hold four, breathe out seven. Repeat.

Together, they whisper. Stretch out and feel, they tell her. Guide us, and let us touch the world around you. Let us be your eyes, let us be your hands. Instruct us and we will follow. We are nobody and

nothing, we are everyone and all around you. We are the quiet of the grave and the raindrops in the river. We are you and you are us.

Her chakra edges out of her, and she can feel the tendrils of the void entangled within her while she moves out of herself now that she knows that they are there. The emptiness is haunting, but she ignores it, shoving her anxiety of it down deep where it cannot bother her. Instead she focuses on the sensations around her, the deep and welcoming thing she has seated herself on, flowing and alive. Her chakra spreads out like an ink cloud inside of it and her mind follows the path of the energy until she forgets where she ends and where it begins. There is hollowness in it, and depth. It is empty, and it is overflowing with all things, the key to life itself.

She is it, and it is she.

Her heart beats and there is unity, a magical moment she cannot describe. They are connected, and from her place she can feel the boys standing there on top of the lake watching her. (On top of her watching the lake.) She can feel the creatures swimming below (Inside of her gut). She can feel the currents inside her veins and the ripples of the surface across her skin.

Around her, the water pulses with her heartbeat, sending moisture over the boys toes. They watch as the water begins to move and swirl, currents sluggishly flowing to life. The gentle wash of liquid against them, lulling around them up and down, back and forth, around and around. The pattern is slow and constant, made of several different streams coming from nothingness. A whirlpool is forming, slowly birthing from the still waters.

The girl in front of them is breathing slow and deep, her eyes closed, but the hair hanging to frame her face is caught in some sort of updraft, as if it is floating. Slowly, her bangs move like tendrils in the unseen current, like snakes in the sea.

The air is like liquid, and the water below them is becoming deep and unfathomable. There is something lurking deep within it, hungry

and forever. An abyss that is springing from the girl, the lake becoming tainted by something that the living should have no knowledge of, and it beckons them all.

Ryuishi sways in the tangible current, her body writhing like a serpent's, back and forth. Time has lost all meaning. There is only the lake and her, and she cannot tell them apart. She stretches on forever into rivers that rush and flow with calm trickles and raging rapids. Further even, she can taste salt water on her tongue, deep and heady, like the sea of her home. She can taste how much she wants to be back there, how much she misses them. She can feel nothing that isn't this, and somewhere she is falling, tumbling forever in the darkness between the stars, desperately trying to hold on to everything that makes her, clinging to the memories of those she holds so dear. Her dark eyes open in a flash and something is horrible and glassy about them and-

She leans over and vomits in the water. The spell is broken.

Watching a cloud of bile sink into the lake, Ryuishi thinks this is exactly like the time she took LSD. Too much information, a sensory overload, and she probably hallucinated some of that. Her body is shivering, and she can't feel her extremities. Her eyelids are heavy and her mouth tastes like acid, and this is some bullshit. She didn't even want to be here, she didn't even want to do this! Where is she again? Who is she again?

Her heart beats sluggishly in her chest, and her body is shaking like a leaf on the wind. Attempting to channel chakra to her limbs is awful, because she can't focus, and it comes out stuttering and blinking in and out like a faulty light. Slowly, she is beginning to sink into the lake she was just one with, and she can't even feel how cold it is.

She wants to ask if they're happy now, but what tumbles out of her mouth is a dyslexic nightmare of "Uyo ayhpp onw?" Her tongue is like lead, and she is inches away from vomiting again.

Somewhere, there is the sound of rushed footsteps on water, and hands grip her shoulders and waist, hauling her up without so much as a grunt. Whoever it is, they are warm.

Another pair of heated hands are running over her, checking her eyes and mouth. Something pinches her hand, and she realizes distantly they are checking for capillary response, making sure her heart and chakra systems are working. She thinks she might have had a small stroke, but she's probably being dramatic. If Zabuza knew, he'd smack her. Kisame would just roll his eyes. The latter of the two is currently holding on to the shaking girl, wondering at what just happened. He had never seen such an affinity for an element before, but the backlash was worrying. Usually the first time you tried to connect with an element, you just sat there and meditated for hours. He knew from experience that when you did connect, you ended up mildly disoriented and your chakra was harder to control. Ryuishi had done it in thirty minutes and is cold as ice, shivering and sick.

She leans back into his chest and he catches the smell of copper and salt water mixed with something floral coming from her, which was out of place with how ill she looks. If she shook too hard she would upset the injury on her ribs, so Kisame holds her tighter, controlling her limbs, trying to ignore how this must look. Zabuza doesn't seem to notice it as he inspects her, pulling down her lip and eyelids before pinching her skin. From what he can see, everything seems to be reacting properly, if a bit slow. He grabs her face in his hands, manually turning her head to look at him. Zeroing in on dilated pupils that seem to be having trouble focusing he clenches his jaw. Why was his tool always so much trouble? It was always getting itself cracked and chipped.

"Focus," he orders her, and wide coal eyes attempt to do as he says.

"Breathe," he says again, and he hears the stuttering intake of her breath, can feel the rush of air against his skin as she exhales.

"Again," and step by step, the boys help her out of the attack they unknowingly forced into, using methods meant for shock patients to bring her down.

Coming back to herself she realizes that a certain spiky haired brat is in front of her, his grubby, toasty hands on her face. Around her waist there is a warm arm keeping her trapped against an even warmer chest, and another is wrapped around her shoulders.

Ryuishi cannot stop a fond, soft smile from growing on her face. "I fucking did the shitty thing," she croaks out.

Behind her, Kisame scoffs and she feels his arms loosening around her, and Zabuza lets go of her face. Her feet slide toward the surface of the lake and the chakra she produces is steady and constant this time around. They wait around a few more minutes, waiting to see if she is back to herself. When it becomes obvious that she is fine, Kisame ruins everything.

"Now we take the next step." she hears from behind, and Zabuza smiles viciously at her.

Merciless douchebags, she thinks fondly. Tomorrow, she is going to put poison in their lunches.

She never does.

Training eats up most of their time from then on, and when Ryuishi goes to the barracks at night, she flops into her bunk, tired and sick. Using chakra like this hurts, and no matter how at home she feels in water, how much she feels like she belongs, returning to it each day is a heavy chore.

Harmonizing with her element is like stepping into the arms of a loved one, safe and warm. Only, behind them is the gaping maw of a celestial monster, reminding her that she isn't supposed to be here. That these people she knows: the brothel workers, the nameless, the boys she has come to care for, they are all just characters on a

page. An invention of someone's mind. The spiraling existential crisis is something she has been burying for years, and it is something she wants to continue to bury. She doesn't want to think about these things, linger too hard on what kind of shit she has stepped into.

Ryuishi doesn't want to remember the kind of things she has faced. She wants rose colored memories of good food and her family, her brothers dumb jokes and her little sister's laughter. The feeling of slipping into her own house, her dogs fur between her fingers and her cats purring at night. She wants to relive the time her dad taught her how to swim, and the hours spent working with her mother. She wants sleepovers with her cousins and sharing a house with her best friend. She wants to be filled with Hanako's giggles and the companionship of the nameless. She wants to be joking with Kisame and wrestling with Zabuzza.

She doesn't want to recall her mental instability and stressful breaks. She wants to throw away the hangovers and the days spent coming down off a high, the strangers in her bed and the vomiting and illness. She never wants to wake up in the night, still feeling the hands of a strange man on her, the stink of alleyway trash in her nose. She doesn't want to feel the rage and the shame that accompanies images of a hundred dead children with accusing eyes, broken and shattered on the ground. She doesn't want to think about her squad, their corpses painted on the outpost's walls and floating on the ocean's surface, and think, *That should have been me. I'm the one that doesn't belong.*

Each time she runs through the hand seals and pours her chakra into her hands she feels it. The wildness of the water breaking out against her, the gaping void inside herself growing larger. She feels the howling abyss, and the knowledge it gave her. Each time she has to shove it down and force herself to focus, remember the good times. To keep getting back up and trying, keep moving forward, because behind her there is only death.

Ryuishi fully admits that it is the two boys around her that keep her grounded, that force her to stand up again. They take her hands and

make her see, bend her limbs into moving each day when she wants to bury herself in memories. Two little kids that pick her back up and take her out, press her to keep walking out onto that lake. She wants to be better, because they have to have someone better watching their backs. For them she shoves down her sorrow and guilt, she entombs her bitterness and hate for Kiri and the shinobi world. Without her boys, she would be lost, shattered under the weight of horrible memories and war.

So when their three weeks are up and the unit is informed that they will no longer be a logistics division, she bucks up and accepts that metaphorical kick in the balls. She goes home, sits in front of a mirror and finally unwraps that jar of black she wrapped up so long ago, knowing that she has finally earned this right. She dips her fingers into the ash based paint, and lifts them up to her face, chin held high. She dots her cheeks and lines her eyes and creates a lovely, fearsome new face for herself.

She is Cat Frank, and long ago, her ancestors did this before battle. She is Watanabe Ryuishi, and she wears this mask like a promise. She is many others, and together they will protect their unit and destroy those that stand in their way.

When they meet by the east gate, the boys look on curiously, but don't say a word. Together, her unit merges with another, and they march back to war, to the front lines. The sound of battle drums fills her head.

AN:YES! Okay, please take note of Ryushi's growing mental instability. She has faced traumas and is constantly repressing emotions like guilt, sorrow, rage, and is trying to dissociate herself from the world. She is also allowing herself to make the boys, who are literally children, into mental anchors for herself. She also is allowing her personalities to influence her more and grow. None of this is healthy. Do not do this.

More Kiri no Kaijuu fun, this time some concern from the boys part. If you think it is OOC, message me and I will attempt to explain my thought processes.

Be warned that the next chapters will have triggers, and that the shit storm for our little girl isn't over.

All thanks to the great and mighty Enbi, my beautiful Beta. A big thanks for all of my readers, lurkers, favoriters and followers. Another shout out to those who leave reviews and keep me writing. Bless your faces, may you get something nice for letting the author know what you like and what you enjoy.

Interlude: The Liar

I do not own Naruto.

This is how it starts.

She is two and they are speaking about so many things, and their words flow so quickly. She can see it on their faces that it is serious, that it is a painful topic. The older woman, with flint in her hair and steel in her eyes, she keeps pointing to her and to a scroll. The other one, the one that feeds her and changes her diaper, is crying.

She tells herself she does not care, and stares back out the window.

Her first word is *kazoku* . It means family.

Keiko cheers and smiles, her eyes bright and proud. She shows her off to anybody who will see, and in a brothel full of lonely, bitter women, it is everyone. Like a parrot she repeats the word, over and over again, and soon everyone in the Okiya thinks that they are part of hers. She gains aunts and sisters and a grandmother or three that day. She plasters the happiest, cutest grins across her face and gurgles at every one of them.

None of them are her family.

The very first word out of her mouth is a lie.

She sits still and quiet as the murmur of her nee-san's talk washes over her. They are playing with her hair, painting her nails and painting her face. She is a living doll, who laughs and smiles exactly when they need it most. She is so young, so cute, so willing to please. Those in the Okiya love her, and are always willing to give

little Ryuishi an extra treat or tidbit. She is quiet when they want it, loud when they need it, and everything in between. She brings sweets to those sad girls and laughter to the mad ones. They tell her she has a great intuition. She just smiles and giggles.

She can read each and every one of them like a fucking book.

Even without words she can lie.

Keiko loves her, she really does. Ryuishi tells her that she is the best mom, that she's really good at cooking and that she is so pretty. The girl brings her flowers and candies and gets in just the right amount of trouble. It is better than Keiko could have hoped for.

(Keiko does not love her, she loves the idea of her. She is not a mother, at best she is a neglectful older sibling. Her food is okay but she is very pretty. She brings her flowers to get the appropriate message across and calculates the exact amount of trouble she can get in before it becomes too much.)

Her lies mix with truth and the world is painted grey.

She looks out at the city through the fog laden windows shaped like full moons, and the world is drizzly and grey. She can see her reflection staring back at her with narrowed black eyes sunken into tan cheeks. Her lashes are long and prominent, just like her jutting cheekbones and poking ribs. She tells herself she always wanted to be thin, and that three small meals a day are enough for her. She convinces herself that she always looked this haggard and stressed as a kid, and that the nightmares aren't getting worse. She thinks that her family is out there, in another world, waiting for her to find them again. That this world is only a blip in time, and that she has a purpose here. She says the knowledge of her past life is here to help other people.

She has always lied the most to herself.

The day she meets the orphans in the alley, she does it out of pity and the kindness of her heart, because she truly cares about children. To see such young lives in such a state brought her soul low, and all she ever wanted to do was help.

That is what she will tell people later on, and they will clap and cheer and name her a saint.

What she will never say is that she has shaped them into the thing she wanted, that she manipulated each and every one of them for her own selfish purposes. She will tell the world that it is love that drove her to bring every citizen up, that she honestly believes that every person is born equal. She will never breath a word about histories from a strange land where citizens rebelled against their leaders and died horribly. Not a single syllable about how the chaos that would rule and the burning, hellish agony when walls were torn down would pass her lips.

Born as an whore's daughter, she could never cross the class divide on her own, so she builds up an army to tear it down for her, giving them a goal she knows is unreachable. She weaves a single strand and watches her spiders scurry back and forth in the shadows to make her a web.

Her lies are powerful, this she has always known.

She meets a boy with blue skin and a smile full of knives. The first thing that fuels her when she sees him is *I can use this* . Not, *let's be friends*, or *that's my favorite character*.

No, she wants to use him like the deluded child she knows he is.

Kisame is strong and Kisame is loyal. Kisame is the first canon character she ever meets. He is snarky and level headed, and his favorite foods are crab and shrimp. He enjoys his tea with two

spoonfuls of sugar and he likes to think that the world is bright and full of hope, that being honest means something.

She wants to break him in her hands and tear apart his worldview. She wants to shake him until he has brain damage and point to the women around him. Ask him if it is fair that they are forced into this work, never given training or education otherwise. She wants to spit at his feet and drag him to the tiny corpses in the back alleys, demand answers about how fair life was to them.

Instead she peppers him with compliments and throws him off balance. She makes his mind reel, and then she tells him a single truth.

"I am a liar," she says, and she smiles like a fox, because eventually, he will forget. He will believe in her, build her up. Then she will make the world around him tremble. His precious ideals and oh-so-sweet beliefs will collapse. She will bring him low and show him the truth behind her lies.

A boy grabs her by the hair and beats her down. He proclaims to all who witness that she belongs to him, and a quiet rage blooms in her heart.

Zabuza is a wolf, an alpha whose only concern is leading his pack and tearing at any weakness exposed. He is quiet as he stalks his prey, and vicious as he tears into threats. He claims her as his tool and makes her hunt by his side, but they both know deep down that she is not a part of his pack.

She is a crow, opportunistic and clever, using him to protect herself. She lives off the corpses he makes and draws strength in his efforts to conform her.

She is a cat, lazy and apathetic, watching him struggle and rage, not understanding the ways of the world. She leaves him gifts of food and companionship so that he will not stray away.

She is a sea snake, venomous and cruel. When he cuts down a hundred children for another's reward, she strikes him down with poison on her tongue and punishment dripping from her fangs.

She is a magpie, loud and shrill where he is quiet and cold, drawing attention to herself, mimicking words to make sure that the world will never see the treasure she has stolen from them.

Zabuza is a wolf who is convinced he has dominated her. So willing to believe he has created his perfect, shining tool. He makes her walk by his side and bow to his whims, but she is a liar.

A liar who has fed the wolf and brought it into her home. A liar who has shaped a little pup into a ferocious guard dog. She has pushed and molded him like clay in her hands until he took a form that pleased her.

She has stolen his loyalty from the village that birthed him and forged him into her tool. This is the retribution he has wrought.

Together, they live a lie.

She steps onto a battlefield and she fights for her life. Around her there is death and destruction, but her face is lined with a bloodthirsty smile. She cuts down enemies and drowns their will to live.

She is afraid, so very afraid.

At night her hands shake, and she can't find her voice. Alone, she cries tears that are salty like the sea and her heart stutters a staccato rhythm in her chest. She remembers the Void and the endless distance between galaxies, the hollow vacuum of space and time itself.

This world is too big, too angry. It is so very different from her home. She hates it, she wants to burn it down and sleep forever. She

doesn't want to be among strangers and monsters.

She bucks up because there is no way but onward in her web. There are plans to execute and lives to take.

She tells herself it will be alright, but knows that too, is a lie.

There are too many parts of her built on lies. The foundation of her mind is shifting and unsteady, rippling like the surface of the ocean. On top of the waves spring palaces built on lies, every brick a falsehood pulled together by mortar made of fiction. They are great castles hiding a single truth from the world. From herself.

Each grand design houses a single part of her, and they stretch around her in a wide circle. From each staircase there is a line that bleeds out, cutting across the waves to a single, small space.

This is where they become her.

They argue inside their head for hours, going over plans and thoughts and random rages. They feed off of each other, leaking energy and fueling another spat. They can rarely agree on anything, and harmonizing the chaos is so very hard.

There is only one thing they seem unanimous about, and that is the tendril of emptiness that contaminate the mindscape.

Do not look too deep, they all say. Do not gaze too hard .

They never say not to forget though. Forgetting would be ignorance, and they will not throw away such a valuable knowledge. They may wear a thousand faces and ten thousand masks, they may curse and laugh and cry, but they are not stupid.

They are not completely dishonest with themselves.

She has been lying for so long, lying so hard, she forgets the point of it sometimes. She finds herself making up small things sometimes, messing up on tiny parts of her stories. If you stepped away, the anomalies would be small in scale. What her favorite food is, what her fourth birthday was spent doing. Nothing large, nothing that matters.

She has infected herself with a disease known as deception, and she knows it. She wishes she could slip further into it, because the one thing about being a liar, a really good liar, is that you must always keep sight of the truth.

She must know why she is lying, what the consequences of her deceptions may be. She has to keep so many stories both straight and twisted inside her head that it is agonizing. There is no coming back from the untruths she has acted out, the lies she has spoken and the half-truths she breathes as easy as air.

She has no idea if it will ever end.

For her there is no single truth, no ultimate honesty. Everything is a matter of perspective, and she has so many that she can tell you each one you want to hear. She can see you inside and out, laid bare, but she cannot judge. There are too many sides to every story, too many pieces of a whole. The truth about truths is that they are all subjective, and there is no one right honesty. The world is not painted in black in white. It is not even painted in grey. There are a myriad of colors, a pantheon of hues. The differences can be so very, very subtle that sometimes they are impossible to tell apart.

No, she knows where it started, but for her, the lies will never end.

She is Watanabe Ryuishi. She is Cat Frank. She is the scholar, the madman, the murderer, the friend. She is the joker, the stoic, and the unwritten. She is the bird, the serpent, the cat, and the spider. She has one hundred faces and ten thousand masks. She is the daughter, the sister, the bully and the Samaritan. She is empress and queen, servant and slave. She is peacemaker, hope-giver,

warmonger and soldier. She is so many parts that she is a whole, but above all else, she is a liar.

AN: So! We see another side of Ryuuishi that isn't as obvious as her joking self. Oh the duplicity! This is important to know because there is a lot of shit coming up in one big emotional rollercoaster of an arc without much humor. Also I got a review requesting a picture of Ryuishi in warpaint and got sort of inspired. Unfortunately I can't draw children so we have an older Warpaint! Ryuishi link on my profile. Addressing future use of canon characters, I feel people should know I usually write a few chapters ahead so I can't tweak the chapters too soon, but I am writing more canon stuff right now. Hold on tight, we get to see them soon.

We thank the great beta Enbi for making my poop readable.

Seriously though guys, I cannot express how much your fucking reviews mean to me. It makes me laugh and dance like a few. I also carefully monitor all your favorites, follows and visitors to my story. Bless your hearts.

Meeting the Beginning of Something Big

I do not own Naruto.

This, she decides, is some sort of bullshit.

She snakes her chains around her opponent, a man with bright blue hair and a snarling face, and traps his limbs close to his body. Tugging on them with her leg, she sends him tumbling forward, close enough that she has little trouble shoving the bladed tip of her weapon through his atlas, ending him. Removing the sticky weapon, she scans around her. Kisame is somewhere ahead of her, mowing down enemies like it's nothing, his katana swinging wildly. Somewhere to her left, Zabuza is enjoying this way too much, as per usual. The two don't even look a bit tired, and she wonders if she is the same. The three of them have developed pretty good endurance after so long.

A hail of kunai fly overhead, explosive tags fluttering behind them. She tucks down and rolls, shouting out a warning for all who can hear above the sound of battle, and slips into the water that Kisame so helpfully provided at the start of all this. Above her the world ignites, and shockwaves shake the liquid around her. All she can think is that this? This is some serious bullshit.

Launching herself into motion, she glides through the blue, her fingers flashing through hand seals. This dickery has been going on for years now. Years! She wants to spend her leave in the village, eating great food, taking hot showers, maybe taking a dump in an actual toilet for once. But *no* ! No, Kiri has to send them out on another fucking mission, fighting some more opponents, in the middle of goddamn nowhere. Seriously, she doesn't even know what village they're from anymore. She stopped caring, like, a year and a half ago. Casting a genjutsu that will make the woman above her

experience both the horrors of the Void and drowning, she wonders when she stopped caring about that as well.

(Probably after the third time she got fucking stabbed. Seriously, that is some nonsense right there. It really fucking hurts.)

The world shakes again, and the disoriented woman never even notices Ryuishi explode from the water and slit her throat before she sinks back in. Disgustedly flicking blood from her weapon, she fumes on how much crap this is. The Kiri no Kaijuu have made a name for themselves, and she really wishes they hadn't.

A hand wraps around her ankle seconds before she is pulled from the small lake, and she whirls on instinct, lashing out at her attacker as she is dragged on her belly. She doesn't even have to think anymore as her body reacts.

Kisame made a name for himself a while back, finally growing into the title of The Monster of the Mist, taking the moniker from their group name. His sadistic side has grown from slapping the shit out of her to literally dismembering opponents before he kills them. Puberty not only made that kid grow like a fucking weed, but really fed his aggression as well. He is a billion feet tall, towering over her like a giant, and is built like a brick shit house, one that might just rip off your arm. To think, he had once scolded her for ripping out someone's eyes, the hypocrite.

Zabuza, now called The Demon of the Bloody Mist, had also been struck by the awful disease, forming into some semblance of a teenager. The first time his voice cracked she had laughed herself sick, because his stern countenance was so ruined by the effect. True, he had punched her in the broken leg she had been sporting at the time, but it was well worth it. The only thing that bothered her about it is she had to abandon her heaters, as the horrible day had finally occurred and she had woken up in their shared bedroll with something long and hard jabbing her in her back.

She had never scrambled out of bed so fast in her life. Kisame had laughed in her fear stricken face.

Unfortunately, the ravages of time had not left her alone. She too is beginning to experience familiar symptoms. Her once cute, delicate features have begun to warp, her cheekbones becoming more prominent, her hips and butt swelling in size. Hell, she was been forced to buy a bra. A bra! After years of not needing one, going back to it was like being slapped with a cinder-block. Her chest feels like someone has been using it as a punching bag, and the only reason her mood swings aren't noticeable is because her mood always is wishy washy. Second puberty is just as terrible as the goddamn first time around.

The opponent above her is blindsided by a shirtless blur, and Ryuishi grunts as she hauls herself up. Briefly she checks on Zabuza to be sure that yes, he is literally punching the face off of that man, and no, he doesn't need help. Sighing, she flashes through more hand cramping signs, knowing this is a bit of overkill for the level of their opponents.

"Suiton: Bakusui Shoha!" she exclaims, letting her (empty, hollow) chakra flood out into the water behind her. A pulse races across the forested clearing, and a great wall of water emerges behind her, twisting and writhing unnaturally. Parts of it seem to be hard to look at directly, and the eyes slides right of it, but that doesn't really matter because there is thousands of pound of force rushing at her opponents, ready to crush them under the colossal strength of her wave. In the corners of her eye she sees Kisame jump high, and she grabs Zabuza by a leg and tosses him up in a display of strength before planting her feet. Beneath her, the water boils and churns as it rises high above them, giving her a great view down some woman's shirt. It's a shame they're enemies, because whoever she is, her rack is fantastic. *Damnit hormones, not now!*

Behind her she can hear Kisame let out an adrenaline fueled whoop of excitement, and even Zabuza seems to be chuckling as he clutches on to the wall of water before it folds in on the weight of

itself. Her stomach feels fluttery every time they do this, and she smiles past her frustration. Surfing always was a favorite of hers.

The figure collapses and the tsunami hurtles down and out, the chakra shaping it carefully funneling it forward at their enemies. People disappear like ants, and she knows the power behind it is enough to crush bones and hemorrhage organs. Not to mention the force of the debris tumbling around inside of it.

Riding down the face of a force of nature, soaking wet and grinning, this is where she gets her name. They call her Kiri no Ningyo.

The first time she heard it, the boys with her had laughed. After being told what it meant, she laughed too. The ningyo was something like a mermaid, only it told fortunes, shifted shape and cried tears that were pearls. When taken from their homes they could summon earthquakes and tsunamis. If one ate their flesh they could become immortal, or die a painful death.

Ryuishi, on the other hand, says exactly jack shit about the possible future, rarely uses a henge, and fucking wishes she could cry pearls. That would be a free life of luxury right there. She is horrible with doton techniques, and can only make a wave three quarters the size of Zabuza's and maybe, *maybe* two fifths the size of Kisame's. She is also pretty sure that if you ate her flesh, what you would get is a swift fucking kick to the face and a slow death, not immortality.

Crashing down to earth again, the trio backtracks to take down any still-living opponents while they are stunned from the wave, sending out blades from a distance and then crouching over to remove heads the way a hunter-nin would. For extra thoroughness, and also because Zabuza got shanked in the back of the knee one time when they didn't.

Standing up straight, she groans and stretches her hands over her head. That jutsu always eats up a good portion of chakra, and now she feels like she drank a bunch of liquid on an empty stomach. It's just sloshing around in there, defining the empty space. She hears

one of her boys approaching behind her right before a hand is around her wrist, dragging her close. She squawks as Zabuza pulls her close to his gangly teenage self, looming over her and moving her limbs like a doll as he checks her for injuries.

"Zabuza!" she snaps, "We talked about this!"

He grunts and checks a hole in her shirt by her waist, where a tendon had come close to nicking her. She slaps his hand away and plants a foot on his chest, leaving her dangling by a wrist.

"Personal space, you fucking creep! Knock it off!" When it becomes obvious that he is ignoring her, yet again, she calls for reinforcements.

"KISAME!"

She hears a put-upon groan as she attempts to wriggle out of her friend's grasp.

"Seriously, do I need to explain why this is weird again?" she hisses at the boy.

A blue-grey hand pries open Zabuza's fist, and Ryuishi staggers for a second as she regains her balance. Looking up at the familiar disapproving glare of their commander, she grins. Zabuza just goes to visually inspect their other comrade, exuding an intimidating aura the whole time. Seriously, for as fucked up as he is, the boy sure is neurotic about injuries.

"Thanks, boss."

"I thought this would stop when you two made chunin," he grunts out.

"You were mistaken," she informs him gravely. "Zabuza's creep factor knows no bounds." Seriously, if Kisame thought a pair of battlefield promotions were enough to stop the dysfunctional

relationship the trio shared, then he was as mad as... well, a Kiri shinobi. Ha. God, she was hilarious.

Zabuza smacks her across the back of the head for the comment. She hisses at him and clutches the assaulted area. What a fucking douchebag.

"Tools should not speak unless ordered to," he tells her.

"Oh, not this again," ruminates Kisame.

"You're objectifying me, you bag of shit!"

The trio squabbles among themselves all the way back to whatever squad has them this time.

One thing Watanabe Ryuishi can tell you now, that she couldn't say years ago, is that the frontlines in a Shinobi Wars are a place unto themselves.

Running in a logistics squad had never prepared her for this. There were moments in battle when she forgot where she was, or who was an enemy. Moments when she could no longer tell up from down, because she had been jumping and diving for so long.

Storms of kunai and shuriken would rain down on her, interspersed with poisoned senbon and exploding tags, so thick in number that they would blot out the sun. The earth would rumble under her feet, and the air would drip with poison and mist. Fires burst into existence every other second, and the action would pull the air from her lungs and the sound from her ears. Ambushes were always a possibility, and sleep was hard to come by. Sometimes she would close her eyes and wake up to white phosphorus burning down the clearing and melting her skin. Other times they would be the ones raining down hell, waking up squads in a torrent of brine, swords and sharks.

Sometimes there would be nothing, and they would just sit and wait. Hurrying from one place to another for no reason at all. They would joke and play, but nothing could take the shadows from their eyes and the paranoia from their minds. They grew up like this. There was no other path, no other way for them but war.

The Void is her constant companion. Standing on a freshly cleared out battlefield, she can feel the drain and taste the hollowness. The air might reek of truly ridiculous amounts of blood, hanging on the wind like fetid butcher's wares. It might stink of popped gallbladders and torn intestines that smell quite literally of shit, but it is full of death as well.

Her head is constantly a mess, and most nights she wakes up gasping and covered in a cold sweat, hearing voices and reliving memories. Sometimes she is in an alleyway, or on a battlefield. Sometimes she is walking through her old home like a ghost, screaming for her family, her culture, her world. She opens her eyes and fire burns in her mind and voices shout out, ordering her to simultaneously break down and cry and pick her mask back up, but usually she is not alone. So she sits by strangers and friends alike, staring into the darkness, lingering in half remembered horrors. The only thing she knows these days is the one thought she started with.

Protect her boys .

They protect her too. She can't count how many times their warning calls have saved her, or how many of their distractions have given her the opening she needed to take a life. All she knows is that she is tired, so very tired of this enormous pile of bullshit. Maybe it would be different if she held any loyalty for Kiri, or respected its soldiers in any shape. But all she can see is a bunch of bullies and misfits pulled together by the simple want to live, and that doesn't inspire her. That doesn't make her want to fight.

It makes her want to stop.

The only thing that keeps pushing her is her own rage. The rage at her commanders for giving stupid orders she know will cost lives. The anger at her shitty situation. The frustration she sees when she goes back to the village and every civilian is stooped so low, looking so worn from the work of supporting this war. She hates the world she lives in now, but she keeps pushing. Keeps moving forward, waiting for a sign.

Ryuishi doesn't know how much longer it can last, though. She thinks that the weight on her back isn't suited for someone like her, and eventually, there is going to be one last straw that breaks her.

"Neh, guys?"

Her spiky haired friend grunts and looks at her, twisting from his place inside his bedroll. The moonlight is scarce tonight, and she can only see the vague outline of them in the darkness. She still hasn't been able to get glasses, even after all these years, but she deals with it.

"When this is over, you know what we should all do?"

On her other side Kisame turns his reflective predator's eyes on her as well, and he notices the soft smile she is wearing, her gaze dreamy and far away. Not in the glassy way she sometimes gets, where her words are confusing and disjointed, but in the way she gets when they're all eating together, or one of them accidentally lets something nice slip out.

"We should find some sunny beach in the south, and build a house there. Together," she tells them. "Someplace where the water isn't cold, and the sun is warm on our skin. Where we can just sit and do nothing all day and listen to the ocean."

Zabuza, for once, doesn't interrupt with how impossible this situation is. He doesn't bring her back to the harsh reality that they can never leave the village, not without defecting. Kisame doesn't tell her how

traitorous her thoughts are, or how she needs to stop living in the clouds.

These calm, tranquil moments are coming less and less these days. There haven't been any more extravagant tales about the A-team, or the missing nin Rambo. She stopped talking about the great sea serpent who birthed the world years ago, and she only ever told the story of the Shawshank prison once.

"We could catch fish, and grow a garden. I would cook the best food every night, and we could have bonfires under the stars," she whispers, "We wouldn't have to fight unless we wanted to, and nobody would know where we lived, so they couldn't ambush us."

"Would you make that crab stuff again?" Kisame asks, humoring her.

"Whenever you caught crab and shrimp," she lies.

"Could we beat up trespassers?" questions Zabuza.

"Of course."

She lays between them, surrounded by their warmth, separated by only their individual bedrolls. All three of them silently entertain dreams of the future.

Ryuishi tries to enjoys the moment, but she knows it is not meant to last.

On their next leave, a runner finds her in the barracks. The girl is only six or seven years older than her, and she looks exhausted. Her eyes have bags underneath them and her colorful kimono is torn in some places. She silently hands Ryuishi a scroll.

Kagami is requesting her, and somehow, the young Mist kunoichi doesn't think it is about anything good.

Omake: What do the Kiri no Kaijuu dream of?

Momochi Zabuza has a dream, a goal he is determined to reach.

He wants to become the world's strongest shinobi, so strong that no one can stand against him. He will paint the world red with the blood of his enemies, and every foe that falls before him will be another piece of proof that none can stand against him. He will wield the legendary blade Kubikiribocho, and he will make the world see that he is deserving of every ounce of their respect, and legitimize every one of their fears.

When he makes it to the top, he will wear the robes of a Kage, and all will acknowledge his might. By day he will work at the top of a tower, with windows that span in every direction and with a view for miles. He will be on top of the world. He will have all the control he could ever want, and an arsenal of tools to use.

But his first tool will always be by his side.

In his head, she does all the paperwork for him, and is happy to serve. She comes in his office every morning with a warm plate of food and a hot cup of tea. Sometimes, they'll even fight, but only when he wants to. They'll be older, after the war, and she'll wear those shirts that show off her stomach all the time, not just when she's going to bed. She'll also wear that pair of pants he saw her try on once, the ones that she didn't buy because the size was too small and "black yoga pants don't offer shit for armor."

She won't ever have to worry about armor though, because he's the strongest shinobi in the world, and she belongs to him.

If anyone tries to, say, kidnap or hurt his tool, he'll show them exactly what it means to mess with him. He'll tear them down piece by piece, rip them to shreds, and she will help, because she's a good tool. Then, she will get hurt, because she always gets hurt. Then he'll have to carry her, and he won't be wearing a shirt because shirts are dumb and one of the enemies got close and ruined it or something.

She'll turn to him and blink her dark eyes slowly and smile. She'll say something like, "What would I do without you?" and he'll just grunt as the base explodes behind them, because even their corpses aren't good enough to exist in his world. Then, they'll go back to the tower and she'll cook dinner, and it won't have any of the stuff he hates. Kisame will be there, because Zabuza is merciful, and he thinks he'd make a good jonin commander. They'll eat together inside the tower.

At night, when he goes to bed, Ryuishi will be there with cold hands on his chest and long hair that smells like fruit and saltwater lying loose around them. They'll fall asleep in a big bed, because she likes them, and share the blankets like they did when they first started out as ninja.

It won't be perfect, because Zabuza doesn't believe in perfection. He does believe in greatness though.

So, his future will just have to be great.

Hoshigaki Kisame has had the same dream for as long as he can remember, and it really hasn't changed much.

His goal is to become one of the legendary Seven Swordsmen of the Mist, and beyond that, the greatest swordsman that ever lived. He'll be so good at what he does, that no one will ever doubt him. The people on the street won't call him names or shy away from the way that he looks. Instead they will speak of what a shining example he is, how honest and loyal.

Civilians will give him discounts in their stores and restaurants because he will be so well known, so kindly regarded. The village will recognize his skill and make him a high ranking jonin, and sometimes he'll spend his day in an office, a hot cup of oolong tea on his desk and a collection of swords behind him.

He will wield the mighty and amazing blade Samehada, the sentient creature that already seems to enjoy his company. Eventually his teacher will offer him one last fight and he will win the prize he has

been waiting for since he was a child. Together they will strike fear into the hearts of their enemies. Some battles will be hard, but Samehada and his unit will always see him through. Zabuzza will inherit his own blade, as is his right, and together they will be the strongest swordsman in an age, and they will go down in history. Kisame as number one, of course.

When they get tired of fighting, they will edge into their favorite restaurant, and their old teammate Ryuishi will be there to greet them. After a long and successful career she will have finally followed her true calling, cooking food. The only wound she will ever get from that is the occasional sliced hand or burnt finger.

She'll wear her hair down in a long, loose braid, with an apron around her waist, and there will always, always be a bowl of her seafood sukiyaki waiting for him. She'll smile her sideways smirk, only it won't look so bitter in the future, and she'll laugh and crack raunchy jokes with them like always. She'll run her hands through his hair and tell them both that they aren't eating well enough on the field, then ask them something like, "Do I have to come out of retirement just to make sure you eat better on missions?" and he'll put his hand on hers and scowl, and she'll laugh because she was joking all along.

Before they leave, she'll give them both hugs, and they'll pretend that they don't want it, but she will wrap them up in her arms tightly regardless and send them off with cake for later.

When he goes to bed at night, it will be in a house that he has already paid off. There will be a picture of his unit on his wall, the same picture he has by his bed now. When he lies down in his very, very high thread count sheets they will smell like pear blossoms and the ocean, and he will fall asleep to a husky voice humming a soft, gentle song.

It won't be perfect, because Hoshigaki Kisame doesn't believe in perfection. It might not even be great, because he knows that reality

is hard and demanding. For his dream though, he is willing to work, because he know's he can make it a reality.

He will work hard everyday if he has to, so his future can be warm.

Watanabe Ryuishi tries not to think about the future, or the past. If she has a dream, she won't speak it, because it is too impossible, too far away, and it hurts her heart to think about. She doesn't even have a goal, because she want to live in the moment. She is tired of setting herself up for failure.

What she does have is a desire.

Ryuishi wants to leave this awful, shitty village and take every nameless child and victimized civilian with her. She wants to travel, nothing trying her down to one place. She wants to explore little towns and big cities, and eat everything that looks mildly appetising. She'll meet new people and make new friends. There will be laughter and warmth and brightness.

She'll befriend little kids and teach them fun stuff before sending them home to their families. She'll share bad jokes with a hooker in every akasen she can find, and leave every place just a little cleaner and brighter than when she found it.

Then, as she gets older, she'll drink good booze and party wildly at night. She'll go to one of those 'reibu' she has heard so much about and shake her ass. She will bring twerking to the Elemental Nations.

When she gets tired, and the yearning for a bed of her own get too strong, she will head south to a warm, sunny beach where the waters are temperate and a short walk away. She'll never put on pants or a shirt and live in and out of her bikini, so her tan skin will glow a deep and pure bronze color. She'll sip juice out of a coconut, and do absolutely nothing.

Sometimes, her boys will come around. She doesn't care about what they're running from or why they decided to visit, she'll just stuff them

in the guest room and whip up their favorite meal.

Zabuza will grunt and sit on the beach. He'll get a funny tan line on his face because he'll refuse to take off his mask, but he'll fall asleep in the sand anyway. Maybe he'll even get a sunburn, because that would be hilarious. Kisame will join her in the water, and they'll swim forever. Her skin will get wrinkled and she'll be jealous of his ability to stay underwater so long without getting wrinkly skin and she'll get in a splash fight with him. It will probably devolve into a jutsu fight which she will end up losing, so she'll go pout beside Zabuza on the beach, and tan in the sand beside him.

At night, they'll light a big fire with driftwood and roast fish over the open flames. One day, when she's ready, she'll tell them about where she came from and what it was like, and they will understand.

Zabuza will say, "You're still my tool."

Kisame will say, "You've always been weird."

Then she will smile, and definitely not cry.

When she goes to bed at night, it will be in a big fluffy ass bed with a million pillows and covers made from cotton. She'll wrap herself up in a cocoon of warmth and safety and fall asleep to the smell of blood and running water.

It won't be perfect, because she will still ache so deeply for those she has lost. She will hurt so very, very much. It won't even be great, because she doesn't know if she can ever reach that level again. Her future seems tepid and chill.

No, her future won't be perfect, or great, or warm, but it will keep getting better.

AN: Yay! The beginning of a very important arc! Hold on to your shit everybody, the roller coaster is starting. This chapter is a

little short, so I included an Omake I had saved up. I think dreams are really telling about a person in general, and it is the same with these three.

First of all, I want to thank everybody so much for sticking with this. The feedback I've gotten keeps me alive and happy, and even more importantly, it keeps me writing. A huge hip-hip-hooray for all my reviewers, bless your tasty fucking hearts, and to all those who favorite and follow.

An encouraging whisper to all my lurkers, I'm lucky to have you.

Another reminder that I drew a picture of older Ryuishi and the link is on my profile.

**ALL THE BLESSINGS FOR MY BETA, ENBI, WHO DESERVES
SUNSHINE HAPPINESS AND HAMBURGERS: BETTER
BURGERS 4 BETA'S 2k15!**

Meeting the Final Straw

I do not own Naruto. Triggers for gore. Warning about many things.

The red light district is where Watanabe Ryuishi was born, where she was probably meant to work. Looking at the section of the village that she hasn't seen in years, she wonders how much has changed.

The cracked concrete paths are still covered in gritty black grime and puddles that smell suspiciously of piss and sake. The walls are still filled with holes and broken pieces where succulent green vines peek out and creep out to reclaim more land. There is still trash and grit on every corner. It's midday, and there is little sunshine. The heavens are clouded grey and overcast, threatening to rain, and the air still has the chill of eternal cold in it.

Girls in colorful kimono still line the streets like butterflies, flittering to and fro, calling out to buyers and soliciting the unaware. Their smiles are cherry red and they laugh behind fans, but their eyes are dull and hazed, not even seeing the person that stands before them. Long hair in delicate updos shimmers with fake gold and cheap silver, and she can smell the potent mix of scents that move like waves off of them, hiding the stale stink of sweat and sex.

When she casts her gaze into the back alleys, she can see the drunks and the pickpockets that mingle with corpses of varying sizes. Syringes and broken opiate pipes lay used and forgotten in the gutters. Ahead of her she can see a man with a bottlecap necklace fencing drugs, looking all too healthy. *Wartime is always kind to dealers*, she thinks, *everybody is looking for an escape*. She knows how fake his charming smile is. She knows the deal. In another life, she was just like him, pushing product that she knew would kill anyone willing to purchase.

Nothing has really changed.

Walking through the fog-covered streets now, though, she still feels like something is different. Maybe it's her.

Her feet don't make noise on the broken stone beneath her, and even the swish of her pant legs is hard to hear. Her steps are no longer quick and hurried, but loping and apathetic. There is no fear in her eyes any longer, because she has seen worse than these streets. No strange man or woman could force themselves on her anymore, no hungry Okiya mother could snatch her up and add her to the stables to make her quota.

Ryuishi can feel eyes on her that were never there when she was a toddler, peeking out from corner alleys and everyday stalls. She may not be the best ninja in the world, and she may not see very well, but she knows what is watching. She can read these signs, the quick little feet and the defensive maneuvers. Something in her gut squirms, an unnamed mix of foreboding and pride.

She slinks into back alleys that once frightened her with ease, sliding through the muck and ignoring the physical incarnations of broken dreams and lost hope that lay like corpses in the dark. Kagami has called her, and like the curious child she is, she has chosen to answer. Yet, as she walks into the higher end of the akasen, she is stunned by what she sees.

The street that her brothel is on, destroyed.

Buildings on this street all sport some sort of damage, and a few are still hissing and smoldering against all odds. There is rubble in the place of the building that once housed her, and the grand sign that welcomed patrons is shattered on the ground. She notices bodies on the ground, lying in coagulated blood on the street, dirtied by the stagnant water and apathetic world. There are only a few, but the tale is telling.

There is only one person alive in this place.

A familiar head of steel speckled dark hair catches her eyes, and she has to bite back a bitter wave of despair. She has never seen Kagami look so old. Stooped low as she picks through the ruins of the block like a crane stepping through water. Her back is hunched and her robe is torn. She looks like this village, she looks like a broken beauty.

Creeping through the demolished streets, she feels dread settle in her gut.

Her footsteps leave prints in the grime that has formed from the ash and dust from the wreckage, and they stand out a peculiar grey against the black. The old woman turns as she makes herself known, but doesn't say a word. Her once frightening and stern eyes are hollow and cold, drained from the force of whatever happened. She lifts a single, gnarled hand and points to a kimono clad form on the streets. Ryuishi's heart leaps into her throat.

Slowly, ever so slowly she makes her way to the body, already knowing who it once was.

She squats in the layers of soot and water before the pale skinned beauty who lies as still and broken before her like a shattered doll. She is dressed in a beautiful kimono stitched with autumn leaves, and her hands are perfectly manicured. They are so small, so clean.

Ryuishi feels cold regret sweep through her heart.

Keiko's face, once so clean and whole lies smashed in like a rotten pumpkin. One of her dark eyes is still staring up at the sky, while the other is like clear jelly, popped and smeared with grey matter and bone shards. Red hunks of flesh like fish guts are all that remain of her right side. Half of her long, beautiful hair is still pinned up in an elegant updo that lies matted in gore below her. No longer does she smell like cinnamon and perfume, but rather the smell of a skinned carcass fills the air, which is ripe with bile and rancid shit.

Ryuishi kneels before the corpse of the woman who brought her into this world and brushes her cheek softly, before closing her eyes forever.

She feels a presence behind her, standing over the splattered remains of a whore and her child. "What happened?" she asks quietly. Her voice is a husky whisper, laced with venom. She needs to know.

Kagami reads this, and her own tone is bitter when she speaks. "Shinobi on leave," she answers in a clipped, concise manner. "Out in the brothels for a good time. They were rowdy and drunk. There was gambling, an argument over a bet."

Ryuishi closes her eyes. "Did they mean to...?"

"No," the once-matron tells her on the graveyard of her life's work, "This is just collateral."

Cold, quiet rage blooms in her heart and pumps through her veins like poison. "Will there be compensation? Punishment?" she asks, fully knowing the answer to come.

"No," Kagami answers quietly.

This, she thinks, is it. This is the last straw, the one that will cut her forever. She has given this filthy, wrecked shithole of a village every fucking chance and it has spit on her for the last goddamned time.

Eleven years. Eleven fucking years she has lived this horror, this extravagant lie. She pretended that the nightmares never happened, that she was never attacked and assaulted when she was four. She told herself she couldn't feel a dead man's fingers on her thighs and his breath on her face. She would dream of it, screaming out for help with no one to answer her calls, that faces would laugh and tell her that they could make her feel good. She said that she could still trust strangers and that the world was okay, because he was *deaddeaddead*.

She told herself that she would accept the fact that a hundred, a fucking *hundred* children died for no goddamn reason at all. She chanted it over and over again as their accusing faces stared up at her. As their broken, mangled bodies dragged her down into hell, reminding her that she should have known, she should have saved them all. She represses her memories of the smell in the air, the memories of a little Hozuki boy with pure white hair and laughing purple eyes, children playing little games. *If they do not exist, then they cannot die*, she told herself, shoving it all down and locking it up.

She lied through her teeth and told herself that it could get better, that she could last through a war and be okay. That in the end she would be alright, but here she is looking at the corpse of this body's mother and she can't even cry. To her, Keiko has become another statistic, a civilian casualty in a shinobi struggle. The battlefield stalks her at night and claims her soul in the day. She hears the telltale crackle of fire when it is not there, and the whistling of kunai cutting the air when it does not exist. She shakes and dreams of waking up bathed in white hot fire.

She pretends that she does not feel guilt for outliving her squad, for deceiving her teammates. For lying to children's faces every day, because the boys she has come to love know nothing about her. She acts like she is not mourning the family and friends she knew for years before this. That she does not cry for a lifetime that existed before this.

This village has ruined her, warped her from the person she was, and it will pay dearly for creating such a monster. It will regret the day it forced her into its ranks and taught her how to kill. It will weep bitter tears and beg for mercy, and she will show them what they showed her. Kiri has no mercy.

This city will be nothing but ash by the time she is done. She will set it ablaze and salt the earth so that nothing can grow here ever again.

When she stands, her fists tremble with anger by her side. "Kagami," she says and her voice is so cold, so empty as she stands beside her birth giver's corpse.

The broken woman looks at her, the child she called lucky, as she transforms into something she has never seen before. The air around the child roils with something dangerous and deceptively calm, a placid surface that hides the currents below.

"Do you want vengeance?"

The woman, who is only alive due to her past skills as a kunoichi, looks, really looks at the child before her. She has known from the day she was born that this girl was not meant to be, that this child was strange and unnatural.

She has known her from the moment of her birth, but looking at her now, she doesn't think she has known anything at all.

The girl's hands are fisted and shaking by her side, her body tense and ready to burst. Chakra oozes from her pores, weeping a strange, unnatural hollowness that makes the old woman's skin break out into goosebumps. Her breathing is slow and tightly controlled, her chest heaving to a timed beat. Her hair moves like tentacles around her face and the very mist in the air shifts to answer her call.

Ah, but it is her eyes, her dark, endless eyes that key the tired woman in. There is no sorrow in them as she stands by her mother's corpse, only regret. They are empty and forever, spinning madly with the something she cannot name. In them she sees worlds she has never known, and the haunting emptiness of forever. She sees war and famine and destruction.

In her eyes, Kagami sees the promise of death.

Standing in the tattered robes she has worn for two long days, her hair grimy and unclean, the aged matron feels like a mortal before a

spirit. She sees something she cannot comprehend, something that the living were not meant to know, a creature from a fairy tale thought only to exist in the stories of children and old monks.

Physically, Kagami is taller, but she feels like a speck of dust to the child, a fly caught in a spider's web. Her presence looms out unchained and swallows the world around them, devouring it all with a careless hunger.

Silently, the thing, (because it is not a girl, its eyes are *emptyemptyempty*) stretches out a hand.

"If you do everything I say, I will make them suffer."

The old woman thinks on it, the village which has forsaken her, the place that threw her away when the first wrinkles lined her face. The home that has taken everything from her. She thinks of the uncertain future promised by a spirit hiding in a child's body, the pain and the bloodshed she says she will rain down.

In the crumbled ruins of her life's work, she reaches out her wrinkled hand and laces her fingers with the girl's, and she sells her soul for the very chance of revenge.

They leave the rubble and the corpses behind them, and Kagami packs up the last of her bags. Ryuishi leaves her with instructions on what to do. Discreetly, but quickly, the old matron will make rounds to every brothel owner she trusts and spread the word. She will be a messenger, a leader, and a hand of Ryuishi. The girl herself leaves for another destination.

Her mind is a jumbled mess and she can't think straight. Her personalities are mixing up, blending and obscuring. She can't remember who she is supposed to be anymore, what she is supposed to do. All she knows is the plans she has constructed, the web her spiders have woven, the girl she has raised.

She stalks the streets like a staggering drunk in her mind, weaving in and out of focus, her blurry vision fading and then sharpening. What she is going to do is traitorous, treasonous and foul. If anything goes wrong she will die, and those that follow her will die with her.

She doesn't care anymore.

(Maybe, this time, she can go back. She can go back to her own home and meet her family again. There will be cars and computers and arguments at midnight. Maybe it's better if she dies. She was never meant to be here.)

To any outward observer though, her steps are clean and precise. Her head is held high and she is keenly aware.

(This is a lie. She is a lie.)

She makes it to the trade district, sees a flash of feathers and torn robes. She breathes in deep, and whistles high and loud in the shadows of the village.

The previously empty spaces between warehouses fill with curious, mistrustful eyes. The ghosts of the mist peek out to gaze upon the one who has cried out their call.

"Bring me Hanako," she hisses at her spiders, "Tell her that her the one that knows you matter has come with a choice."

Sharp little eyes cut through the fog, disbelieving and awed. She hear the footfalls of runners being sent off, the quickened breathing of the nameless. A few even step out of the shadows to look at her, the one they have spoken of in myths. The one who started the tribe, the founder of the family. She is younger than some would expect, and she looks deceptively innocuous.

(She has always hidden in plain sight.)

This, they whisper, is the one . This is the creature who taught us how to find food and gather clean water. This being brought us together, showed us how to hide from prying eyes and dangerous hands, to come together as a tribe. She left us food in the alleyways, and gifts in the night.

Ryuishi stands before them, leaking that same uneasy aura. She has never been deaf or dumb. She knows what Hanako has made her to be, the stories the nameless tell at night. Ryuishi never left her children alone to face the world, because they are hers. She created them, pushed them together and molded their minds. She shoved past the front of useless gutter orphans and saw potential in the children, who were so desperate for love and affection. She saw the hungry need for acceptance when she was four years old, and she gave it to them. She planted seeds inside Hanako and the two, who planted seeds of their own. She fed them ideas that had no place in this world, thoughts of equality and human rights. She told them that they were enough, that being alive was enough, and she would accept them no matter what.

She spoon fed them things they needed to hear and manipulated their lives, until they took a shape that pleased her.

Here she stands, watching a crowd of ghosts gather before her, each infected with philosophies and ideas that are revolutionary in comparison to a caste system. She poisoned the eastern philosophies of feudal systems and clans with her own words, planted a seed and watered it so it grew and flowered. The product of years of plotting stands before her, wily and sly.

Her offspring have grown into the backbone of this village. She started with children, those who were younger and older than her, and over the years those children grew. The nameless became the dock workers, the restaurant chefs, the stall keepers and store owners. They were the drug dealers and the whores, the day laborers and the maids, the cobblers and the apprentices. She stole the entire generation of the lower class in secret and she made them hers.

A blonde head parts the crowd.

Hanako, her beautiful girl, stands before her almost a woman grown. She is older than her by years, and her beautiful eyes have turned into gems. Her body has welcomed the changes of adulthood gleefully, and though she is still thin, she is healthy as well. She is fierce and proud, and her wild hair is filled with braids and tokens.

"I knew it," she whispers, rushing up to the child she called teacher, "I knew yah'd keep your word!"

Then she is rushing forward, and Ryuishi has to fight down the urge to go on offensive. She throws her small arms wide open and accepts the embrace from her first student. Her arms are warm and tight, and Ryuishi shoves down the guilt for the gauntlet she has put this child through. Years of waiting were never easy, she knew from experience.

"I said I'd come back with a choice, didn't I?" she answers, slipping into her role.

The teenager leans back from the hug and determination sparkles in her eyes. Her hands tighten minutely on the eleven year old's shoulder, as if to make sure she is real. Sometimes, Hanako had doubted that the child she knew would ever come back. She thought her young teacher, the first one to show her love, would never come back. She had heard rumors of a dark haired girl's skill as a kunoichi, the way people called her a monster. She heard that only one girl had survived the slaughter of an entire group of children, that she had been paired with demons for a team. She had thought that she had been forsaken.

Then she heard the stories of gifts in the alleyways, she caught glimpses of the growing child on treks to other districts. She saw the same girl from the rumors interact with demons, she saw the way the monsters looked at her with affection and comfort.

She had shown them love too, Hanako had thought, and her heart had been put at ease.

Because no matter what people said, she still loved. Her teacher still cared for them, still left gifts at the open end of dirty dens. She loved so much that she gave it away to demons and monsters, to ninja and soldiers.

Hanako feels a hand, unfamiliar and callused, close around hers in a familiar way. She looks and sees the same dark, empty eyes and long lashes. The nostalgic warm smile and clean, dark hair. She squeezes it tight.

"Yah, ya did," answers the blond.

"You know what I am offering, then?"

Hanako feels unease, but looks out to the gathering crowd. The ones she hand picked, the people she has grown beside. They look at her with the same respect she gives them, they teach her the same way she teaches them. Her people. Her tribe.

They deserve better, she thinks. They deserve to be safe and warm, to have their voices heard when they cry out.

She looks back to the thing that looks so much like a little girl, the nameless spirit born from the mist. Her eyes are empty and her skin is cold, but her soft smile is so warm, so promising. The plan they began years ago is coming to a head, and Hanako knows she should be nervous and afraid. She knows the consequences if they fail, if it does not work. She has gone over it a million times, has tweaked here and improvised there. She knows what should happen better than almost anyone else. Only her teacher knows more.

"I do," she says.

"Know that there will be no consequences from me if you do not. Tell everyone that it is their free choice," her teacher says solemnly, "But

let them know that the waiting is over, and that it will happen whether they join or not. Be warned, It will not be pretty."

Hanako holds the girl's gaze and breathes deep.

"Day after tomorrow, Hanako. We have one day to gather our things and say goodbye. If you and your tribe are in, I need to know by tonight."

Hanako's face is grim, but she nods. That is soon, but the boats and the bags and the bottles are ready. They have been ready for years now. The idea that the plan is happening, finally happening, with so little warning, well... It numbs her a bit.

"I will gather them all and offer the choice," she says quietly. She feels a cold hand squeeze her own again, and the comfort it offers is welcome.

"When you are ready, ask for Watanabe Ryuishi. I will see you tonight," she whispers in her ear, slipping from the blonde's grasp.

The teenager watches her go with the rest of the crowd, eyes all locked on the proud form of their benefactor. She has never forgotten what it was like to watch her easy, stalking gait, or the melancholy way it felt to see her go. As she turns to her people, she smiles.

She finally has a name to give her teacher.

Ryuishi's mind is a mess, and the soft rage that boils beneath her skin is heady and strong. Tonight she will have her answer and meet her army. Tomorrow they will lay the last traps.

On the third day, Kiri will burn.

Her spiders will escape to the four corners of this world, infect every shinobi nation and elemental country with her brand. They will sing

the song of western ideals, and slowly, so slowly, things will change.

Her tribe will go out, and Kagami's whores will go with them. They will leave the trade gates in boats, bags carrying their whole lives on their backs. They will forage and thrive off the land like she has taught them, and they will travel. Her flowers will be caught up in the wind and wave, and their seeds will be planted in new lands in foreign soil. They will bloom like gutter weeds, and the ideas she has given them will burn through this world.

This is what she has been planning for her whole life. Everyday since she saw the power gap, the need for a social leader. Sneaking through mists and teaching the nameless to be ghosts so that they never caught the Kage's attention, Danzo's attention. When she sets this powder keg off it will burn so fast, so bright, that no one will be able to turn away and ignore.

Some people might have tried to change the characters, to befriend the villains and prevent deaths. Someone else may have spread the knowledge of the future around so that it would have to change a little bit. They might have informed their Kage, been taken for a fool.

Ryuishi took the sideline characters, the background world itself and set it to explode. She made faceless people stand up and rise, she gave them rights, the ability to say no. Leaders will look at street rats and gutter urchins and know that if they treat them wrong, if they deny them, they will rise up. They may die, but they will die tearing at the structure of the village and the social classes. The ninja will strike out in fear, but you can not kill an idea.

How much will they push the civilians around when they can embargo them? How will ninja villages survive without trade goods like metals, foods, textiles, woods, glass, herbs and liquors?

If her people die here, it still will not be over. The nameless have become merchants and traders already. She infected every orphan in every war torn village she came across on mission with ideas. If they die, they become martyrs.

She is eleven years old, and has undermined the social order.

There is only one thing Ryuishi never, ever planned for, and that was to meet a blue boy with a smile full of knives. She never counted on the boy with spiky hair and dark brown eyes. They were variables she never saw.

She never counted on making friends with two boys who were born to die in canon. She never foresaw herself coming to depend on them so hard, to love them so very very much. For them, Ryuishi had stopped all of her plans for a long time, but not even they could make her stay here forever. This village is toxic, it is a poison, and she can no longer live with the way it is killing her.

They are her best friends. Her family. Her world, and she has to leave them behind.

She cannot do it without saying goodbye, without giving them one last gift.

She slowly, so very slowly, makes her way back to her bunk room in the barracks. She doesn't want to do this. She doesn't want to leave them behind in this cold world, to abandon them to their fates.

In her mind, part of her is screaming. They are her boys, her wonderful, psychotic, monstrous little boys. She wants them by her side forever and always. The part wants to smother them in warmth and love and kindness, to protect them forever and always, to take away the hurts they have seen. She wants to sleep in a big bed with them at her sides, her arms around them. She wants to see Kisame roll his eyes and finally fill out his tall body with muscle. She wants to play with his course blue hair and feed him his favorite foods every night. Ryuishi wants to watch as Zabuza finally takes the sword he was born to have and ascend to his rightful place. She wants to wrestle with him and tease him. She wants an atmosphere filled with snark and violence and family.

Another part of her knows that no matter how much she loves them, no matter how much she will yearn for them, they need to grow without her. They need to make themselves into the men she knows they can be, and for this to happen, she must leave. She must do the best for the tribe she has created and the civilians she has lead on, because she made them what they are and the responsibility is hers.

(This is another lie she tells herself, another excuse she forces down.)

She knows that after this, Kisame will hate her. He always hated liars and dishonesty, and to him, becoming a missing nin is the worst thing someone could do. It will be her ultimate betrayal to him, abandoning her unit.

Zabuza will stew quietly at the disobedience of his tool. He will be foul for weeks after she leaves, and spit on her name. He might not hate her, but he will always make her regret not following him.

She takes the stairs one step at a time, heaving herself up for to her room. She has some gifts to give, some time to spend before she disappears in chaos and destruction.

Ryuishi opens the door to her bunk and set to work, packing away the meager material possessions she has come to collect in this world, stowing away things for a journey that will likely last a very, very long time. She doesn't have her kimono from the Okiya, or the ribbons and perfumes that Keiko gave her.

(Keiko is dead, and she hadn't seen her in years. It aches.)

What she has is a weapons maintenance kit gifted to her by Kisame when he noticed that her blades were getting dull. A set of kunai she has yet to use from Zabuza, who was always hoping her aim would improve. She has the ingredients to their favorite foods, their preferred dried goods. She has a picture of them pinned to her wall, all nostalgic and tiny. It was not too long after they got recruited to the front lines, and she had forced the two in to take a picture at

some podunk town in the middle of nowhere. They were glowering at her and she was smirking at the camera, pleased as punch. Right after that they had eaten most of her candy stash and refused to sleep next to her that night. They had glared at her from across the way in a show of pissed off male solidarity.

She carefully unpins it from the wall and cradles it in her hands.

These boys have written themselves across her life. They have watched her cry, watched her rage, watched her cuss and joke and plead. They have seen her brought canyon low and ride the mountainous heights.

She loves them, and she is going to betray them.

Her mind is a mess and the anger at the world still bubbles under her skin like molten stone in her veins. It mixes with absolute and complete sorrow. Together they form a passionate frustration. Frustration at the world, the government, the feudal system, at herself.

(She does not want to leave them.)

She hates who she is so much. She absolutely and completely loathes how easy this is, how simple it is for her to turn her back on them, to cast a whole world into civil war. Stinging, bitter tears leak from the corners of her eyes.

She didn't want to come here. She didn't want to go to war. She didn't want second puberty and its damn hormones or to make friends with children whose deaths she has read.

She wants her family. She wants hot coffee and her old house. She wants to introduce her boys to her best friend, and then show them the wonders of Mexican food and comic books. She wants to play with her little sister, the brightest light in her life. She wants to rub it into her cousin's face like the petty child she is that she met actual,

honest to god Naruto characters, then laugh as one bakes them delicious food and the other tells awful jokes.

Why can't she stop crying? She's supposed to be angry at them for what they represent. She's supposed to be happy that her plans are coming along.

All she feels is empty and cold, like the Void.

Ryuishi slides against the wall, staring at their dumb, scowling faces and weeps like the little girl she is. Her tears are hot and salty, and so, so sad.

She loves them, she thinks. She loves them all so fucking much. Her family, her friends, her world, her boys.

Shelovesthemshelovesthemshelovesthem-

She cannot have them.

Her bag is by her side, ready to go. Her weapon is wrapped around her, set for action, but here she is, bawling her eyes out. She loved this village too, she thinks. She loved this world. It was her favorite, a long time ago, but now she loathes it so much.

She always knew that to really hate something, you had to love it once.

Her quiet, wet sobs shake her entire body and drive the air from her lungs. It's messy, and she looks horrible, but she is alone in her room and nobody will ever know. The picture she holds is carefully, slowly put in her pack with the portraits she painted so long ago, the ones that have faces like hers. In a weatherproof box in the bottom of her bag, she puts the pictures of her family together and locks them up tight.

"I will always love you," she whispers thickly. Her tongue is heavy in her mouth and her face red and wet.

"Always."

Zabuza is sharpening his sword when his tool walks in. She is quieter about it than usual, slipping through the seam of the open door and shutting it behind her. Her usually defiant face is hidden and turned at the floor, and she is fiddling with something in her hands. He does not falter, or even acknowledge her existence as she breathes deeply, the way she does when she is nervous before battle, or when she wakes up from a night terror. It is a calm, collected thing that goes by a rhythm he knows by heart.

Seven in, hold four, seven out.

He can count it like the fingers on his hands or the knives in his pouches. He knows her instinctively, the habits she does, the food she eats, the way she talks. She is his favorite tool.

Silently, and he is certain now that she is much too quiet, she glides to his side, where she belongs, still not showing her his face. It's beginning to really piss him off.

She keeps fiddling with that box in her hands, and watching him run the sharpening stone down his blade, lulling them into a quiet companionship. The air around her bubbles with a chaotic energy, and she seems to be content to just sit at his side for a while, absorbing his presence.

Not that he isn't pleased with the development, but there is still something... off about it.

Finally, after what seems like forever, the edge of his weapon is razor sharp. He wipes it down and slips in inside its sheath. She sits there, staring at the dirty hem of her pants the whole time. When he gets back and sits down on the stiff cushion of his bunk once more, she quietly slides the box over without a word. He grunts and accepts it. Finally, fealty from his tool. This is proper behavior.

Opening the small white square, he is confused to find a charm. A glittering gold medallion attached to a short but sturdy loop of chain, designed to dangle off the hilt of a blade. He picks it up and runs a thumb over its lustrous surface, taking in the engravings on it. A demon mask, a stylized shark, and a mermaid, all wrapped in chains. It is aesthetically pleasing, he thinks, but why did she get-?

"You can find me with it, just show it to the kids in the akasen," she says, and her voice causes him to look up. When he does, his blood boils.

Her eyes are red and puffy, swollen from tears. He can see where she washed her face because the skin is pink and soft against the tan.

"Who?" he demands, and she smiles the warmest, kindest smile he has ever seen cross her face. It isn't her usual smirk, or her bawdy grin. This isn't the fond one she gives him when he eats his food without complaints, or the feral upturn of lips she gets when they fight. It is so open, so different than what he knows.

"I'm taking care of it," she answers, and he feels like he is missing something, like he doesn't understand.

His heart most definitely does not skip a beat when she takes his hand in hers, and what is he missing? What is going on? Her hand is cold like usual, and her calluses are rough against his own, but her palms are so soft, her hands so small against his own.

"Zabuza," she says, and he doesn't know what her voice is doing. She looks so happy, so vulnerable and weak, but her husky voice is so empty and... and he doesn't know. He isn't good at these things. She's the one who's supposed to explain what people are doing and why they act weird. Is she broken again?

"Thanks for being my friend."

He grunts because he doesn't know what else to say.

"You should go for the Kubikiribocho soon. I think you could whip that old man's ass," she tells him, and what is the point of this? What is happening? He demands to know.

She squeezes his hand and stands up, her feet hitting the ground softly. Why did she give him a gift? Why is she here?

"Keep that gift, it's going to become pretty valuable one day," she says, looking at the door.

"Sure," he answers her, eyes following their joined hands. She turns to look at him, staring at his face for a long time. He doesn't get what is happening.

Slowly, so very slowly, she leans down from where she is standing and her free hand raises up to run through his hair. He stiffens under the contact, and most assuredly, in no way, does he blush. He would kill anyone who ever said so.

Then, most surprising of all, she kisses his forehead, and he thinks... he can't think. He is very confused, but his impassive, stoic face never shows it.

Her smile is so happy, so accepting as she watches him, her hand clasped tightly with his. "I love you," she tells him, and his mind blanks out.

He can feel his hand slip out of hers, and her soft lips leave his skin as she pulls away and turns toward the door again. He cannot see her face again, and his vision is full of her retreating form.

This feels big, like it's important. His instinct is telling him that something strange is going on, but he doesn't understand what it is or what to do about it. She pauses with her hand outstretched to turn the knob and leave.

"Neh, Zabuza?" she asks, and her tone is so quiet, he almost can't hear it.

"What?" he asks, and his voice is as gruff as ever.

"We'll meet down on that beach in south one day, right?"

He takes his time, and he thinks he is slowly beginning to understand the implications of her words and actions. He isn't sure, but he has a sinking suspicion. His brown eyes harden with determination and ferocity.

"I'll find you," he tells her, and it is something like a promise.

He doesn't see her smiling sadly at the door, or feel the shudder she holds back. He never notices her grasp turn white knuckled, or feel the panic that tells her to stay, *just stay*. Don't leave him. He never hears her gulping down a second wave of tears, battling back another breakdown.

What he does see is her cracking open the door and sliding through, quiet like a ghost.

There is a knock at the door as Hoshigaki Kisame is idly flipping a kunai through the air. He tosses it up from his laid position on the bed, watching it spin through the air lazily as he answers.

"Come in."

He catches the wrapped hilt in his hand, feels the weight of it in his palm, and with a flick of his wrist, embeds it to the corner of his room, right on the seam. Six other kunai stick out in a straight line below it.

He turns to view the newcomer and is mildly surprised to see the girl of his team standing before his closed door, face turned downward, a long box in her hands. Usually she doesn't knock.

"Ryuishi?" he asks, leaning up from the pillows, bracing his weight on his elbows.

"I got you a present," she blurts out, stretching out the hand with the box.

He isn't stupid. Something is definitely wrong here. Her voice is broken and heavy and she still won't show him her face. What the hell happened? Did her and the other brat have a spat? Does she have a black eye again? Man, she really is a vain little thing. Still, he takes the box from her, wondering what the occasion is.

He looks at the plain white rectangle, then up to her. "What for?" He doesn't catch her bitter smile.

"I saw it and thought of you," she answers, and well. That's definitely unusual.

He shrugs it off and opens it carefully, wary of it exploding in his face. She hasn't pulled a prank yet, but she seems like the type.

Inside, surrounded by flimsy white tissue paper is something he is sure cost a lot of money. He doesn't know what to say, because it really isn't his style, but it is something. He lifts up the chain wrapped braided cord and admires the quality of the metal. It is sturdy, strong enough to withstand breakage in a fight and made from many little pieces that could be useful if there was ever a need. In the center, wrapped by sturdy wire, is a glittering blue opal that gleams like the light through water. All in all, it is very pretty, but he isn't a chick. Necklaces aren't really him.

"The cords can unravel and are sturdy enough to be lock-picks or a garrote," she says hurriedly, fiddling with her now empty hands. Her voice is shaking and he thinks she might be trembling a little. "If you don't like how it looks it's still really useful and-"

"Brat, what happened?" he demands, placing his gift to the side.

When she looks up at him, he is lost. Her face is red and there are fresh tears running down her cheeks, and yes she is definitely trembling.

(She will never see him again, she is going to miss him so so much. She loves him, she loves them both.)

Kisame is silent because usually she isn't like this. Sometimes she'll cry about stupid things, like the time she found out their ages. Even then she'll hide her face, but this, this is different. Her eyes are watery and filled with something he doesn't understand, and she looks at him like he might disappear at any second. She's smiling warm and open like it will cover up the fact that she is weeping.

He is lost.

"Can I... can I play with your hair?" she asks, and he flashes back to the first day he met her, a petulant child with an attitude bigger than the whole village. She looks bigger now, here in his room, but still so small.

He doesn't say a word, and she takes it for acquiescence, or maybe she knows he doesn't know what to say. She stands before him as he sits up and reaches out her arms up and out, stretching her cold fingers across his skin like they were kids again, only she is smiling and crying.

Tentative, shaking fingers brush across the the length of his cheeks, the skin of his temple, the expanse of his brow. Slowly, sadly, they make their way up to his hair and settle in his his hair gently running over his scalp like a breeze on his skin.

For a while, they just stay there like that. She runs her hands over his head and memorizes the features of his face with her fingertips, like she is going to forget what he looks like. For some reason, he just lets her.

They must seem like a moving painting, the fading light of evening filtering through his window and illuminating them both. The little girl caressing the monster's face, smiling as she weeps for something unknown.

He can feel how heavy the air is, how much something is off. There is a discordance in the world around him, a weight that he usually only feels before battle. Only, his blood is pumping like a raging river in his veins and he feels no need to destroy. He thinks it might be similar to the way his skin prickles before a hard storm, or the tightness in his chest he gets when he sees his unit hurt.

Something about it feels sacred.

"What happened?" he asks again, breaking the silence with a hushed whisper.

She shakes her head and that stupid, caring smile doesn't leave her face once.

"I love you," she tells him, and he is floored by the statement. It isn't a confession, the way he has seen some people get them on the streets. It isn't a joke or a jest. It is just a simple statement, three small words that he has never heard directed at him before. It is a declaration of loyalty, of compassion and care.

He thinks to all the wounds she has taken for him, the hurts she has nursed away from their sights. The way she stares up at the night sky and the grins she gives them as they joke over meals.

He feels the soft press of lips against his brow, the wet press of tear stained cheeks against his skin and warm arms wrapping tightly around him, grasping on like she is afraid to fall forever. The cold arms loosen and she looks him over again, forcing that grin onto her face. He wants to tell her to stop, to knock it off. Where is the joke? What is happening?

"You can use my gift to find me, when you want to," she tells him, and why does he need to find her? She is right there. She'll always be right there.

"Just use the akasenko," she says, and she slips away, dancing like a leaf on a lake's surface.

He doesn't understand. Is it a riddle? He doesn't figure it out, and she slips out towards his door.

"I'm sorry," she whispers.

"Don't be," he tells her, because she shouldn't be sorry for whatever this is. It's okay if she is weird in front of him. She has always been weird. He accepted it the day they met.

She doesn't answer him this time, and he watches her leave with confusion in his head and dread in his heart.

He clutches the necklace tight.

Ryuishi hitches the bag high on her shoulder and looks out to a serious blond haired teenager who nods at her.

The tribe has accepted.

She casts one last look around her, absorbing the image of the village that had housed her for so long, lingering on the barracks to her back, to the boys she loves. She shoves down the regret, the remorse, the guilt and turns back around. She takes a step forward, and her feet carry her away.

There is a village to destroy, and nothing will stop what she has started.

AN: Well, there it is. The main point of Ryuishi's scheming, the height of her plans at the moment. Now, take a look back and read it in that new light, that our twisted little girl has been plotting the downfall of Kiri for a long, long time. Her head never got fixed, trauma after trauma only exasperated the problem and she is shattering to pieces with no one to catch her. Will it work out? Will she die? Will her actions change anything? I know it might seem sudden and OOC, but

remember that Ryuishi has a lot of sides to her, and most of them are pretty fucked up.

Now we begin the real trials.

A shout out to all my readers, sorry for all the feels! Thank you for my followers, favoriters and Reviewers.

Blessings for my Beta who had to deal with this monstrous chapter and all the feels as well, we love you ENBI!

Meeting The Burning of Kiri

I do not own Naruto.

It begins like this.

Far off the mainland of the shinobi continent, in a village shrouded in mist, a young merchant steps out of his stall. He is little more than a child, a teenager just growing into his own body, and his frame is gangly and awkward, his hair short and messy. He looks like any other boy, and there are no distinguishing features on him, save for the black patterns painted on his face.

He steps out from behind the flaps of fabric and turns his head toward the sky, staring at the overcast clouds, and he waits.

In the district over, a woman who works in the textile does the same. Her hands are rough and worn from needlework and there are feathers in her chestnut hair. Her clothes are fitted for labor and can endure hard travel. She should know, she sewed them herself.

In the trade district, a dock worker manning the gates perks his ears and glances at the bags to his side, nervously anticipating the call. In the akasen a gang full of swindlers and pickpockets jogs through the back streets and alleyways, peddling bottles full of oil and alcohol, matches weighing heavy in their pockets. In the market a girl contemplates the destruction contained in her pockets, silver dust from Suna hidden inside an airtight bag that ignites when it touches water. In a hospital, a newly minted nurse fingers the charges in her hand, running her palm over the mixed buckets full of sticky, viscous liquid that smell like kerosene, gas and plastic.

Somewhere outside a warehouse, a young girl with black hair and narrow coal eyes stands in the fog. The blond headed youth beside her squeezes her hand once as a runner breaks through the

moisture laden air, panting from his journey. Others join the first, and their words all sound the same.

It is time.

It begins like this.

The young girl breathes in deep, collecting her breath and composure. She fills her lungs more than she has ever before, feeling the tightness in her chest, the heaviness in her heart, and breathes out.

A whistle sounds, high and sharp, ringing like a funeral bell through the air. Beside her the blond joins in the call, and the runners harmonize with them. All through the streets of the village the nameless children and the adults that once were the same join in.

The sound carries, travelling like lightning down the streets, like the trilling of a songbird, the shriek of an eagle.

The merchant boy pulls the bottle from his bag and lights the cloth end. It flickers hot and warm in his hand before he cries out in rage, in hate, in desperation and in hope and flings the bottle against the place he once worked. The gas from the stove inside ignites and the world is painted in heat. The flames flicker blue from the accelerant before burning red from the long lasting oil and gas.

The textile woman kneels and flings a lighter behind her and the fabric shop slowly fills with gold as the hungry fire consumes the dry material, creeping across the ground and exploding the lights. She runs and she never looks back.

The dock worker bellows out his strength and those beside him follow his call as they wheel the gates upward and open, heaving the grand metal grates from the water and opening the river. In the akasen the gangs cheer out in sadistic mirth and hurl their bottles left and right, up and down, and the red light district is crimson for a whole different reason. The market girl opens the airtight bag and

flings it outward to every stall and shop she can reach. Sodium and magnesium powder ignites in the misty air and melts through concrete and metal alike. The hospital nurse takes one last look at the wounded shinobi ward from outside, glaring at the windows that are far above, and connects two wires. Napalm and phosphate explode and the earth beneath her feet quakes as the walls crumble before her.

Kirigakure no Sato, The Village hidden in the Mist, erupts into fire.

There is chaos on the streets. Cheering squads (units made to be smart, to move independently without orders and still stick to the main goal) run rampant, hurling cocktails and sticky flames. Homemade acids splash against concrete walls and tarnish support beams while the streets become slick with burning oils and filthy sludge. Painted faces whoop and howl like demons as feathers and fishbones flash in the light. Torn silk strips and bottle caps adorn cackling and screaming masses.

Anger at the village, at the ruling class. Rage at oppression and abuse, for nights spent starving and years spent unloved. Belief in ideas that have become dangerously like a religion.

These are her tools, and this is her madness.

Ryuishi walks through the streets as the air turns thick and dark with greasy smoke, painting the overcast skies black like the night. Her eyes are lined with kohl and her lips stained plum with potions. Her hair is sleek and black, pinned tight to her skull with glimmering steel. She is their phantom spirit, smiling softly at the tribe she has raised, appraising their destruction and finding it pleasing.

(She is hollow.)

There aren't enough shinobi in the village to properly defend against the coordinated attack from within, too many forces stretched thin on the war front. There is no hospital for the wounded, no care for the

dying. Even the strongest suiton users cannot put out the flame, for the oil and grease floats and the metal dust turn the liquid boiling.

There isn't enough flour in the world to put out this kitchen fire.

The trade gates are open and though the commercial boats are already missing (packed full of whores and whole districts' worth of trade goods) there are smaller vessels leaking out, hand carved rafts and stolen fishing boats full of escapees who have never seen the outside of the village. The clan compounds are empty, children and mothers missing, men gone far from home. (Deals made with a snake faced monster with golden eyes and a razor wit.) They will carry her spiders, her flowers, her tribe far away. On feet they will run and in boats they will sail. The wind and water will carry them out of this country, and they will spread.

Even their Jinchuuriki Kage cannot save them now, a puppet without a master, or a child-faced adult somewhere far away.

This her vengeance, her retribution for years of cruelty and trauma. This is her retaliation for oppression and underhanded manipulation.

This is the price the world pays for making her live without her family.

Her footsteps hardly make a sound compared to the cracking, roaring flames or the screaming and shouting of the nameless and the upper class. But inside her mind they are cacophonous, an echo that ricochets through forever. The beating of her heart is a war drum and a goodbye, a tearful farewell and the cackling of the wretched monster inside her soul. She is in pieces, and there are too many to count. She has to rebuild herself somewhere far away, hidden from the poison of the village and the affection of her team. Afterall, this is just the start.

The world melts like water around her and the walls *dripdripdrip* with liquid fire. The shouts and screams and cackles, they all turn to white noise, static in the background as her head fills up with cotton. There are too many pieces falling through, too many parts to the whole.

(Where is she? **WHERE IS SHE?**)

Reality is shifting, warping like a bad trip. She sees spectres that she knows cannot be, flashes of a foreign city superimposed over this one, and somewhere an instrument plays the same notes over and over again.

She laughs, broken and empty. The hysterical sound carries and her children laugh with her as they tear down the cage that kept them. She is hollow, she is a shell. She is overflowing, she is full to the brim. She is a contradiction, an opposite, a truth and a lie.

She is, and that is almost enough.

Her feet carry her away slowly, toward the great body of water outside the walls. The first lake she swam in after so long, surrounded by children who now lie dead. The lake where her boys taught her to blend with water and showed her the Void in her veins. The only home she has known in this place.

She wants to watch the hungry, growing flames from the water, wants to feed the compulsive need to view the destruction she has wrought with nothing other than her words.

Somewhere, a spiky haired boy watches the barracks burn as smoke fills his nose. He does not lift a finger to assist on either side, standing neutral above it all. He wonders at the potential of his tool and questions why he never saw it before. Around him, the city that housed him crumbles and decays into anarchy and pandemonium, and he hefts his sword on his back, wondering how soon he should confront his teacher and take the Kubikiribocho. It will not do to have his tool be better than him, or she might burn him too.

On the trade river a blue teenager gushes water from his body, desperately trying to put out the searing flames on the warehouses that hold the supplies needed to feed the village. He rages when as he watches the oil ride the white waves, still smoldering and intense. His chest aches as another body with familiar war paint on its face

crumples listlessly, floating by him. The betrayal burns hot and angry in his throat and he grabs the incoherent man, who can only be a few years older than himself.

How long had she been planning this? How long had she been lying to his face? Who was controlling her?

" Can I play with your hair?" A laugh like heavy smoke, deep and husky. A smiling face handing him a bowl of his favorite stew. A cold hand staunching her bleeding shoulder after she had taken a kunai meant for him.

He digs his fist into the civilian's shirt and twists, choking him. "WHERE IS SHE?" he roars. The man spits in his face. The blue teenager shakes the man's body like a ragdoll and he looks terrified, but the defiance shows through in his eyes.

"Ryuu-hime will move the seas and strike you down," the man hisses, and that is all the answer Kisame could have ever needed. He flings the man through the air, and he revels in his terror. *Water*, he thinks as he takes off, a blur in the artificial night. She always goes to water.

(But the city is consumed with fire, and she never did make sense.)

The streets and buildings dart by, and the pathways and alleys are full of monsters with laughing, horrible painted faces. Whistling fills the air like knives in his ears. Ashes and embers rain down as smoke clogs the sky, scorching the streets and dancing like dust motes in the air.

" You're beautiful," she whispers, a cup of tea in her hand, dressed like a doll in her kimono. Steel chains erupting from water behind him, guarding his back. A limp body being carried in the arms of a stranger after their first big battle.

His heart feels like lead in his chest and this is a sort of acute pain he cannot describe, an almost tangible ache that fills his soul. She

was there for him! When nobody else was! She saw him, at night around the campfire, when he messed up during training, when his voice cracked! She went shopping and cooked and smiled and joked and cussed horribly!

"Yah, probably, but you're my friend anyway." Fingers like ice over his skin. Chakra that is hard to look at and a cut lip from an enemy nin. A blue gemstone, an expensive necklace. Long, dark hair that smells like saltwater and pear blossoms.

The walls of the village come into view and it registers distantly that the gates are open and the guards are nowhere to be seen. A horrid screaming fills the air. This is his village! It's supposed to be safe, distant from the battlefield, but he can think of no other comparison. Surely she could not have planned this all by herself, there must be someone threatening her, controlling her.

"We should find some sunny beach in the south. Together." Small hands wrapping his shoulder tightly, soothing injuries from war. Curses from the kitchen as she burns those same hands, and lewd, clever insults spoken from a little mouth at those who taunt them.

She isn't this clever, nor this smart. She didn't have the heart for it, he could see it. She was just a kid, and he had known her for so long. There had been something wrong, the day before yesterday, he knew it! He should have stopped her!

A warm smile and a crying face. Fingertips tracing over his features, memorizing them. Deep coal eyes and an intelligence beyond her age. Cleverness and desperation in equal amounts. A figure sitting up, eyes glassy and hazed, staring up at the void between the stars without a word.

"I love you."

Water slaps underneath his feet and he channels chakra to them on instinct alone, his sword held tight in his hand. Mist mixes with smoke, and he can smell the rancid reek of charred buildings and

people from here. A distant form stands transfixed by the sight of his village burning, a pack on their back and a face clean from war paint.

"RYUISHI!"

He skids to a halt, the sword clinking in his hand, ready to cut his once teammate down. The sight of her slashed headband tied tight around her arm sends a wave of rage through him and the water warps under his feet, rippling from the mass amount of his chakra.

She turns to him and her eyes have that same hollow, glassy look to them when she wakes up in the darkness of night. "Kisame," she acknowledges, offering him a sad smile.

He wants to cut it off of her face, but not before he gets his answers.

"Why?" he whispers, and she turns back to the city wreathed in flames. The orange glow casts strange shadows across the planes of her face and dips of her body, making her seem more distant and far away than he has seen her before. Here, on the lake where he taught her how to use ninjutsu, she looks more like an ethereal being than a person.

"I could give a lot of excuses. Because of the way the village didn't stop Zabuza, the way they let my class die. The way it uses us like tools, the way they treat civilians like garbage and let children starve on the streets before they kill them in cold blood. Because Keiko is dead, because they sent me, a child, to war. Because I hate this world, the system of government, shinobi. Because I hate myself," she answers softly, turning her piercing gaze back on him. "But none of that is why."

Kisame is floored. He has never heard these things from her mouth and the shock of it is intense and full bodied. She hates shinobi? Her mother is dead? He meets her eyes with his own.

"I deserve to know," he growls and she ponders for a moment, staring at the distant fire.

"There is no reason," she answers, and his rage floods him as he swipes outward with his sword, planning to cut her to pieces. She dances away, and her bangs whip around her face. She casts her hollow eyes on him once more.

"STOP LYING!" he shouts, hacking at the spaces where she was moments before. She twirls and leaps, using the flexibility he has seen, so deadly to others, to dance out of his path.

"I can't," she answers casually, ducking under a jab, and he wishes she would just stop. Stop this insanity, stop the chaos, stop everything and make it the way it was. "One of the first things I ever told you was that fact."

She leaps above a strike meant to take out her legs with ease, using his outstretched arms as a springboard to backflip away from him. She is fluid grace, and he has never hated that fact more.

"I am a liar, but you can call me Ryuishi," she says in that empty voice, mimicking the words from the first day she met him.

"Instead you called me a friend."

His wordless shout of rage echoes around them as he races forward hears the sound of metal striking against metal. His eyes see the sweat on her brow, the arms bracing against the bladed end of her meteor hammer. Whatever is happening, she is fluctuating between the faces he knows. This is not the hollow one, this one is sad and desperate.

"I don't want to fucking fight you!" she shouts, "Just let me run away!"

He kicks out with his foot, catching her square in the chest. He revels in the way the air leaves her lungs. Another switch, this time the face she wears when she comes to him while hiding from Zabuzza.

"Stop, please!" she begs, and she rolls under a strike that cuts into the water below. Rage filters over the sorrow and desperation, and

she snarls at him as she scrambles away.

"FUCK YOU! FUCK YOUR VILLAGE!" she howls, attempting to slip into the waves, but he jabs for her heart, forcing her have to slide between his legs to get out of the way.

"You're crazy," he spits at her, and he wonders how he never noticed it before, all the splits and pieces that blend seamlessly together.

She cackles like a hyena when she hears him, but her eyes are still so empty, so sad.

"Well you're not wrong, Kisame!" she singsongs, expertly breaking the pattern and gaining ground away from him. He advances as she whirls the chains, spinning them into life.

They keep up, him rotating and striking down and her simply dodging. He does not know how long it goes on, or how many pieces of her he filters through. There are too many and some of them are so similar, but it has never been like this before, never this badly put together. Something is wrong with his traitorous teammate, and as much as he hates her, as much as he knows she must die, he cannot help but pity her.

He's not even sure she knows where she is, but she seems to know him, his face. She recognizes something, and whatever it is, she refuses to attack it save for splashes of water and stinging words.

She looks more and more panicked. Her breathing loses pattern and a few times she loses her balance, stumbling when he knows she should not. Her grace and fluidity is slipping and half the time she dances, the other half she staggers. He cannot tell what is happening inside her head, but so far he has heard her roar, seen her tears, faced her bitterness and fear. For a few moments she looks like she had been ready to send her chain his way before catching herself and cursing colorfully. Ryuishi seems drunk, or high, or maybe sleep deprived. He cannot tell.

"Kisame please, please don't make me do this," she whispers, gracefully deflecting a blow before awkwardly ducking the next.

"You're a traitor!" he roars, like that's the only thing that matters now. Like their history is nothing, like she is nothing.

She whimpers and breathes out at the accusations, knowing their truth. "Last chance, Kisame."

He scoffs, eyeing her neck where he had come so close to killing her. "We both know who's stronger here," he snarls.

She raises her hands and he can feel her chakra boiling in the air around them. He knows that sign, the genjutsu she uses on the field. It does not matter what she shows him now, it doesn't matter if she can force his body to feel. Not even the twisting of his five senses can change his mind on what scum she is.

"I'm so sorry," he hears, right before Ryuishi pushes her tainted chakra into him.

He staggers, and even though he knows none of this is real, he cannot escape. Around him there is something so alien, so unnatural he cannot look away. He knows he can break out, that he has to destroy the monster that ruined his home, that lied to him every day.

But this... this isn't the hellish vision he expected.

This is a house, somewhere in a set of woods filled with trees he has never seen before. There is a woman he has never seen before, but she looks so much like Ryuishi, more than Keiko ever did. She has his teammate's skin, her eyes, her hair. She smiles at him, warm and open and caring. It takes his breath away.

That is a mother's smile.

He smiles, and he turns and feels sand beneath his toes, and the wild wind snaps through his hair. A man who must be as large and as

round as his teacher is standing in the surf, waves breaking at his waist. He holds a fishing pole in his hands, and the overcast sky stretches on forever, unhindered by mist and fog. He turns back and he sees a familiar twinkle in his eyes, a familiar laugh in his ears.

That man is a father.

His breath hitches, and he is underneath a pile of boys with feral grins on their faces. They laugh as one of them punches the other in the gut, and he knows that move. It is the same he has seen her perform a hundred times. He knows the feeling of them around him, knows it like the spiky haired boy who shares his love of swords.

These are brothers.

There is a girl, and when she laughs the whole world blazes with color and light. Her curly brown hair and the freckles on her nose stand out against sun kissed skin. He has never seen her, never known her before, but the ache in his chest from his teammate's treachery magnifies a thousandfold. It is agony, and he cannot breathe when he looks at her, but to look away would be something horrible. The world cries out, and it weeps around him in a familiar warbling voice.

This is more than a sister. She is everything.

I love them. I miss them. I want to go home.

Scenes flash by, and his tongue is heavy in his mouth with awe. There is laughter like he has never heard before, for it is unburdened by misery, war, hunger and famine.

He is on a board, surfing down the inside of a wave, and his finger runs through *blueblueblue* water. He has never felt more at peace, has never felt more like he belongs.

He is fishing in a river canyon. Behind him, his first survival campsite has been set up, and he can feel his father's pride. The lean-to is

shoddy, and the fire is small, but the trout he catches that day is large enough to feed everybody. It pairs nicely with blackberries and burnt marshmallows.

He walks beside the ocean and the wind tangles his hair, but he does not mind. The sun on his skin feels wonderful and golden, and the smell of salt and brine makes him feel whole again, complete in way he can't describe.

He is in a house, and somebody slaps his legs. He moves them, and a girl sits down beside him. A warm, furry body rests under his arm, and they turn to watch a movie.

He is surrounded by siblings and the dinner table is a war zone. Chopsticks fly, and elbows and jabs are thrown as the mad dash for the meal begins. Comforting voices fill his ears, and he slides a sweet onto his sister's plate.

He is in a hospital bed somewhere far away, and his eyes are heavy. Everything aches and his heart is slowing in his chest. He feels sleepy.

He is dying, and he doesn't know how he knows.

He is falling forever, in a vastness he cannot name. There is nothing in this great expanse, nothing at all. It is unnatural and cold, like the taint in her chakra, and he screams without sound. It worms his way into him, and tendrils of emptiness slither inside of the deepest part of his soul, taking pieces of him away, swallowing him up. The abyss is hungry, always so hungry, and he wants to give in, make it stop. He can't though, he can't give up all the warmth, all the love, all of his life. He loves them too much, as deep and forever as the seas. He can't give up his family, his world, his home, but still it is violently ripped away. Piece after piece-

"KAI!" he bellows, and his chakra blows out of him like an erupting volcano.

It stops. The emotions, the visions, the empty and eternal thing beyond his conception. The life that was not his.

What, he thinks, was that? Who were they, what was that world? Why did she make him watch it? Why does she feel so strongly?

Why does his chest hurt so bad?

He looks up, because the genjutsu answered nothing and everything at once. It raises more questions than should ever be, but when he looks through the smoke and mist, she is nowhere to be seen. He has failed to bring back the girl he knew for so long.

Did he even know her at all?

He grits his teeth and steps forward. Behind him his village burns, and the treachery of today stings at him.

She is gone.

Ryuishi is somewhere out there, running alone. Her psyche is shattered, and she has used too much chakra, but he knows he will not catch up to her again, not today.

As the clouds part and a new day dawns, there will lie a smoldering wreckage where his home once was. A quarter of the population will have disappeared, and more will lie dead in their homes. When Kisame returns to his bunk after days without sleep, Zabuza will lean in and hand him a bowl of soup from the emergency rations, and they will eat together in silence, trying not to remember a young girl's homemade stews. The blue teenager will have a necklace draped across his skin, a blue opal that shines in the light.

He will see the traitor again. Whether it is for revenge, death, forgiveness or answers, he will hunt her down. That is the promise he makes himself when he puts the necklace on.

He will find her.

AN: So, another part to this arc, two more and we begin again.

There are a lot of logistics I thought about for this, even though logistics are really fucking hard to comprehend for ninja. If you have a particular question or argument, go ahead and message me. They exist, they just didn't fit into this chapter. To answer just two though: Money and units. Money for supplies wasn't as much because they used improvised and home made incendiary devices. They were stock pile in the years Ryuishi left the tribe on the orders she gave Hanako.

Units of the nameless are independent groups with one large goal and the freedom to move about to complete that goal. Networking at its finest. If you want a reference I suggest reading Enders Game, by Orson Scott.

We leave here with a fracture in the group, and a psychotic break main character. Oh, and a budding revolution.

Thanks to all my readers, favoriters and followers. A hug for my lurkers and a kiss for all my reviewers.

A gigantic thanks to my beta enbi, who fixes this nonsense and also helps me brainstorm .

Meeting Madness

I do not own Naruto

Ryuishi doesn't stop running for weeks. She books it straight out of Water Country, then heads to the Land of Rivers, then Tea, then Rice, then loops back again. She isn't really afraid of anybody following her, since most of the time the hunter-nin don't leave Water Country at all, but she just wants to be safe. After all, she has done what no one has before, taking out a whole ninja village from within.

(Not that Mist is probably telling anybody that as of right now, because really, who wants to be known as the guys that got taken out by an eleven year old? Youngest missing nin in history, that's who she is. Suck it, world.)

She knows that somewhere, bounties are being put out for Kiri no Ningyo. The girl who was swept up in the battle and betrayed her comrades on a whim. The disloyal little child who assisted in the burning of Kiri rather than instigated it, just another coward who jumped ship when given the opportunity. The shinobi circles will be out for her blood, howling at the use of such dishonorable tactics. (Which is hypocritical of them, but hey, Ryuishi is a liar too so she doesn't really have room to talk.) She also knows that some delightful child (fuckin Hanako, probably) has begun calling her Rakki Ryuu, the Lucky Dragon. It is Rakki Ryuu who came down and burnt a shinobi village to the ground. Rakki Ryuu is the mysterious person who swept out of the fog and blazed a trail of destruction and revolution.

Two titles for one girl, and they seem like such different people on paper. She wonders if people other than those she has explicitly told will ever equate the duo and figure it out.

The underbelly and shadier sides of life are already taking to the influx of refugees and nameless with glee. Everybody wants to know how civilians pulled one over on shinobi.

Ryuishi is sure of only one thing at this point-she is done. One hundred thousand million percent done. She is filthy, she is hungry, she is dirty, and she is having to go through second puberty. This is nonsense. She doesn't want to deal with thoughts, she wants to smoke a cigarette and take a dump somewhere far away from the front lines.

Sneaking through borders is awkward, and they think she is an apprentice hooker. Fuck those guys!

She would fight a bear with her own bare hands for a hot bath right now. Seriously. Like, she would peel the skin off of a small bunny with a fork to get clean. Her hair is a rat's nest and her clothes are dirty and her teeth feel gritty and gross. She didn't burn down a fucking hidden village and become a missing nin for this shit.

She actually didn't do it for any reason. Just kinda happened.

That's a lie. Maybe? She doesn't know. She needs time off. Time to sort out her scrambled personality.

The world shifts and warps in front of her, like heat off of summertime pavement, and she knows that it isn't like that. What she is seeing isn't real, there is no static and visual white noise, she's just losing her god damned mind.

It just... it just feels really good, okay? She can't think deeply when she's this lost inside her skull, it makes it easier to accept what she's done (doing) and she doesn't want to face herself.

She wants to take a hot bath and tear into some shit with her teeth, that's what she wants to do. Hate and rage still bubble inside her alongside hysterical mirth and cold reality, and she is so tired. It is exhausting to sustain so many emotions at once.

So she sits up, ignoring the dizziness that washes over her and the splitting migraine she has from lack of sleep. She knows for a fucking fact that most eleven year olds don't have to deal with the kind of crap she has going on in her brain right now. Honestly, she needs a psychologist. Or a neuroscientist. She needs medication and mental help, but there sure as shit ain't any in this fucking world, that's for damn sure.

Ryuishi really, really wishes there was.

She fucking knows this bitch of a downward spiral like the back of her hand. She thought a couple weeks of isolation would ease it up a little, and it has, but not enough. Not near enough.

Her brain done broke, and she can't **tHiNK** .

She laughs to herself in the empty grassland.

There isn't anywhere for her to go, no driving force to keep her moving anymore. She never thought past this point (a lie) and her plans are finished (also a lie).

A monster made of technicolor light and shadow emerges from the ground and skitters like an angry spider with tentacles across her peripherals. Last week she got drunk, thinking it would help. Her, at eleven years old, drinking until she blacked out. She came to somewhere near a waterfall. She hurled her fucking guts out and sat, shivering, sick and miserable in the middle of a raging stream. Then she got back up, stole some more moonshine from some shitty village, and made sure she didn't have time to come down from her poison.

She staggers onward.

To be honest, she might be on a bit of a bender. She doesn't know how long she has been on this one. Time means nothing, a malleable concept conceived by human minds. There are no set morals, no golden rules: everything is changing. The world is nothing

but fluid, a bright splash of paints dripping across space and time. The thin veneer of reality is slipping, and there is nothing but the Void underneath.

(She needs help. HELPMEHHELPME **HELPME** .)

Somewhere on the edge of Fire Country and The Land of Rivers, she crawls into a ditch, dirty and worn out and lays there waiting for death.

Her little body hurts (not her body, too young, too small-) and everything is sore. She hasn't had a real bath with real soap in weeks. (Nothing is real, her life is a manga, a Japanese man's fever dream.) Her lack of sleep and growing mental instability is causing her to hallucinate and even though she knows they aren't there, she startles each time and checks for genjutsu. Paranoia is at an all time high, and she can't remember if she has been drinking water, let alone eating.

Her stomach is bloated and her mouth tastes like an asshole. More white noise and static fills her senses as she lazily rolls her head to the side, just in case she throws up again.

"FuuuuuuuUUUUuUuuuUcK," she groans out, and her husky voice sounds awful from disuse.

The soil is cool against her cheek, a huge difference from the warm (finally, so warm after the cold of kiri: the snow and cold stretch on forever and ever until the darkness blankets her and she is free falling through nothingness) sun above her head and its earthy, mossy smell is heady from where she lays. She wants to lie here forever. She already fucked up so bad. Who will help her now? Does she need help? Who's going to guard her six? How mad is Kisame? Is Zabuza eating his vegetables? She misses her family. She killed so many people on the battlefield. What were their names? Did they have a family? Do their friends miss them?

War and death, hate and love, it's all so fucking pointless. She doesn't even care anymore.

(She loves everything so much.)

Her body prickles like ants are burrowing into her skin, which is finally getting bronze after years of hiding in the fog. It looks nice, she thinks, healthy as it stretches over muscle and bone. If she were a serial killer, she'd peel her skin.

Goddamn, she is wrecked. What the hell kind of thought was that?

She mulls over it as the Devil appears and hovers over the ditch she is lying in. She ignores it in favor of focusing her thoughts on trying to pinpoint which part of her said that.

"The great Rakki Ryu, drunk in a ditch," the Devil laughs in a rasping, hissing voice, "What would her people think?"

"Oh, the hallucinations are fucking talking now. Fantastic," she mumbles to herself.

Apparently, not quietly enough. A foot lashes out and catches her in the ribs hard enough for a few to bruise on the bone. The action makes her want to violently hurl, but she's too lazy to get up the effort to heave.

"Get up, child," the Devil orders.

She groans and rolls over to her belly, pressing her face into the dirt before pushing up with her arms. Hallucinations tend to not actually cause pain when they kick the shit out of her. This must mean that the dickhole is actually here.

"Going. I'm fucking going," she slurs, stumbling to her feet, "Why yah here?"

Orochimaru looks at the child genius before him, his eyes narrowing at her uncouth and thuggish language. When they first met in that

village so long ago, he was certain she had been much more polite than this. He knows for a fact that her missives are.

"You have use yet," he tells her, smiling a grim smile.

"Nope. Crazy. Lost my head, can't do shit."

He sighs, and the hissing sound would usually make her skin crawl, but it's already doing that.

"Hallucinations can be fixed, don't be dramatic."

"You gonna fix them?"

He levels a flat stare at her and she gazes blearily back at him. The girl needs glasses, he observes, and time to sober up. Self medicating never helps these types out.

"We have an agreement, little girl."

She laughs and he glares back at her. "You know for a fact I ain't no little fucking girl Orochimaru-sama," she tells him, snapping into a mirthful personality as quick as day. *Mood swings like woah*, she thinks, and giggles softly to herself.

He grins at her, all teeth and venom, and this time she shivers from fear rather than head problems. Unless fear counts as a head problem. It probably does.

"All the better then."

She gropes awkwardly for her bag, careful not to face plant. What a useful tool he must think she is, to come all the way out here to find her. She briefly wishes she hadn't made all those deals with him, then scolds herself because no matter how crazed he is, he never started a war using nameless orphan children. He never abandoned his teammates for no reason at all. No, she did that. She sold out the clans of Kiri for this, for an apprenticeship with a mad scientist on the

very first war mission. That same day she took the kunai for Kisame, she sold herself for this.

Orochimaru might be messed up, but he is charismatic and intelligent. He's going to bring a long lost bloodline back to life and wrangle enough people and trade power to create his own village from fucking nothing, a feat not seen since Senju Hashirama himself. He's going to join, then successfully quit, the most feared organization of all time. He is going to raise people from the dead and create a whole dimension within himself. He is going to seal his consciousness into hundreds of living, breathing, fighting people who will be impossible to track and harder to kill. He will create a hundred horcruxes and make Voldemort his bitch. He is a fleshed out, three-dimensional human being with wants and dreams, weaknesses and regrets and little to no morals to stand in his way. He is not a cookie cutter villain with a thin mustache and a fluffy white cat, or a pedophile who lusts after young boys. He is much, much more.

Yes, Orochimaru is mad. Mad for power, mad at the frailty of life, mad that for all his hard work, he gets nothing. But he isn't crazy. He is narcissistic, amoral, egotistical, and manipulative. He is as treacherous as a desert canyon in a hard rain before a flash flood and as duplicitous as the many faced gods of the Hindu pantheon. This is nothing new, she thinks, because she is the same, in a way. It just so happens their goals coincide for a bit.

Ryuishi isn't naive enough to think that he found her out of the goodness of his heart, or because she was still useful. Orochimaru has plans for her, tasks she must complete knowingly or unknowingly for him, but that is fine. He thinks she is his pawn, a young child to mold and shape the very same way she crafted the orphans and whores. This is a lie. Together they will weave in and out, dancing around each other like the pair of snakes they are. He will help her heal, and she will help him unlock the key to rebirth. A flashing neon rainbow insect with a hundred eyes scrambles somewhere to her right.

Or whatever he wants really, she's too fucked up to care.

(The hangover is going to be a bitch, she thinks.)

"Alright then. Lead on."

The only thought in her mind as she stumbles to his side, drunk and in the midst of the biggest psychotic break she has ever had, is that the Devil has really nice hair.

It starts off rough when she is eleven.

"You know..." Ryuishi starts from her place in the rafters. "I always thought you would make a good Hokage."

It is few months into therapy, and things are much better. For a ninjutsu master and an all-around bad-ass fighter, Orochimaru never skirted the medical arts. He must have picked some up from Tsunade herself, and obviously knows a great amount of... well, everything. The don't call him a genius for nothing.

Sequestered away in some hideout he has near Lightning Country, Ryuishi has been slowly, so slowly, creeping back to mental stability. Sure, he is kind of manipulating her and indebting her to him. Of course he is trying to twist her psyche into a shape that he wants, but whatever shape that is, it a usable one. She can think clearer now, and the hallucinations haven't appeared in weeks. The personalities are beginning to blend into one seamless person again.

His pills aren't the best, but they balance out at least some of the chemicals in her head. His therapy is the weirdest shit she has ever been through and involves a rigorous amount of meditating, physical training, documentation and psychological experimentation. It's the first of it's kind and probably takes a lot from the Yamanaka family techniques and T&I, but it's better than nothing.

He wakes her up in the mornings, if she has been sleeping, and pushes her to her limits. Orochimaru makes her flexibility turn from amazing to unnatural, ups her endurance and speed, makes her

muscles scream out until she can crush boulders with her fists. Then he works her chakra, building it up as he forces her to complete hand signs faster and continue to keep her amazing control. He makes her form serpents from the river, then from herself, creating the water from within. Her genjutsu has never been faster or more lethal.

Well into the afternoon he works with her, folding the putty of her broken mind over and over until her first instinct is to crush and eviscerate with chains and chakra instead of ask why.

Then he goes for hours asking questions and scanning her brain, sampling her blood, concocting pills and powders. She cooks dinner because it is familiar and safe, and they discuss her hallucinations alongside less sensitive topics from her old world. She never mentions family, or weapons because she know drawing out the schematics for even the most basic rifle would end badly. She skips over most technical things and shares her knowledge of basic psychology and sociology along with math and literature.

Ryuishi falls asleep each night exhausted and in a raging amount of pain, and each morning she gets up and does it once more, too messed up to care that he is making her a more capable fighter than Kiri could have ever dreamed.

She actually feels like a person again though. A manipulative, lazy, amoral, vain, murderously strong, hedonistic person, but a human none the less.

All thanks to the snake faced Sannin and his knowledge.

He is quietly observing a sample of her chakra beneath... she doesn't know what it's called. It looks a bit like a centrifuge and miniature particle collider, and she has no idea what it does, but it seems to be interesting to him. She supposes that handing a piece of her Void-infected chakra to him will have consequences all around, but at this point, she couldn't care less.

"I mean, Minato is a bright kid, and he is a powerful fighter, but the man wouldn't know manipulation if it bit him in the scrotum," she goes on, carefully laying a flat coat of what she hopes is nail polish on her fingertips.

"To add onto that, he's only been in what? One war, and the tail end of another when he was a kid? And he doesn't have a clan to teach him politics." She runs the varnish on her pinky and blows on it.

"Meanwhile, you were the star pupil of the Third Hokage and learned economics, politics, warfare and tactics from the main man's fucking lap. Add on the fact that you're one hell of a scientist, a veritable fucking warehouse of knowledge, a powerhouse fighter, and a clever tactician, and you're a much better candidate. Not to mention how good you are at maintaining a spy network and keeping track of subterfuge. You have that cloak and dagger shit down."

"*Do* continue to sing my praises. I am curious to see what you are trying to flatter me for," he answers drolly, fiddling with a knobs to his right.

She scowls at him, not that he can see. Scratch that, Orochimaru can probably see it. The man is a machine created to be a predator of unparalleled skill, and it is stupid of her to believe that he doesn't know exactly what is going on around him at all times.

"It's not fucking flattery, it's fact. You have more experience and skill outside of the battlefield and on it than a naive child. If I didn't know any better, I would say the old fart was setting up an idealistic, sunshine-and-daisies type of boy for a puppet king who is competent enough to maintain order but not make any serious changes. Or he's lost his shit and chose the most optimistic and cunning brat he could get his hands on."

The man sighs and reaches to the side to clamp down on a delicate set of tools, paying close attention to whatever her chakra is doing and writing stuff down. Even here, accompanied by a girl he could squash like a bug, he moves like a predator. Each twitch of his hand

is more fluid and graceful than she could ever hope to be. Even when doing the mundane, his movements intimidate her.

"Such analytic skill from one who appears so young," he hisses, hands dripping a precise amount of liquid into a beaker. "If only you showed half as much promise as a host."

She snorts and dips her brush into the bottle, coating it with the clear liquid. It smells off and she isn't completely sure dried venom crystals weren't added to the concoction. It would probably be useful in combat, where it could get into open wounds or orifices, but she is more likely to scratch herself than anybody else at this point. Isolation is a clear factor in Orochimaru's plans. It makes every second he spends with her all the more valuable, building up the anticipation for each social interaction and making every effort on his part mean so much more to her. Ryuishi would like to say it isn't working, but it is. It doesn't matter if she knows the games he is playing, she is relying on him for too much at this point for it to not have an effect on her.

He hides her, heals her mind, makes sure she has a place to clean herself, and provides shelter and rations. For a man whose whole theme relies on snakes, he mimics mammal parenting rather well. Even she cannot deny how comfortable the den he has created is.

In return, she allows him liberties. He takes her blood, her bone, her hair and spit. He has her chakra, too. She knows that a man like Orochimaru could slay her a thousand ways with these things, wreck all that she has built up, but it is the price she willingly pays for his time. Besides, if he forced experimentation on her he would be nowhere near as kind, and the results would get at least somewhat skewed. Best to have this uneasy truce.

"My body is nothing worth possessing. We both know my physical attributes aren't where I draw my strength from." A lie, they both know it. Her body is at least half her strength, and she cannot scheme against him if he takes it from her. It is too bad then, that the death inside her chakra is poison to a foreign soul. They did not

travel the Void. They have not traversed worlds. They have not died. Or whatever it is, she doesn't know the variables, she just knows that Orochimaru can't use her as a host body.

Haha, sucks to be him, her body is rockin'. She has a six pack, something she lusted after in her past life. And her boobs are finally coming. It's going to be ballin', except for the periods and stuff. Whatever.

"If you continue speaking, I will sever the vocal chords in your throat and refuse to heal them so you may live in silence and learn not to speak about such aggravating topics, child," Orochimaru tells her without even looking up. She just barely manages not to trace the newest scar on her throat where he carried that promise through and she had screamed without word for hours, a carefully cut red smile bleeding from her neck. The thin white line encompasses her whole neck and looks like someone succeeded in cutting her head off and putting it back on.

All in all, it's just another day of stating the obvious and waiting to be healthy enough to leave and resume her work. She has to check on the nameless, start scouting the other Hidden Villages, make sure to keep her standing in the eyes of the people, give some humanitarian effort, and stay hidden the whole time.

She finishes the final coat and waits for her nails to dry in silence.

The day she turns twelve, something awful happens.

She is in the woods in the eastern section of Fire Country, finally released from the Sannin's 'helping' hands. It would do no good for a pawn of his to become rusty with disuse and lose the support of his people. After all, the spy network of nameless children, hookers, thugs, and general lowlife she is building up will not just be for her.

(Yes it will.)

Ryuishi thinks it's because he played the isolationist card too hard and it backfired. She gets a little stir crazy and obsessive when she's alone for too long. The exact miniature replica of his outfit and makeup must have been shocking to see on her when he came back from Konoha.

In all actuality though, it took her weeks to get that shit right. Hand sewing his tunic had been a complete and utter bitch, and contouring her face to make her skin paler and more angular had been agonizing. The worst part was the eyeliner though. Ryuishi has no clue how he gets his so perfect, but his hair and eye game is too strong for her to replicate perfectly.

She's also really surprised he didn't outright kill her for the insult of copying his appearance. She thinks he might believe her to be a young child emulating a man she respects or some shit, when in reality she was super bored.

He probably has tails on her, and then some tails for those tails, but she doesn't mind. The man is rightfully paranoid. Fire Country is a backstabby sort of place with a terrible habit of letting secrets out, and for the foreseeable future their partnership must remain unknown. After all, she has plans where she must distance herself from others' influence, and he cannot be seen cavorting with what appears to be just a child. So, one thing leads to another and here she is, checking in on her windblown flowers.

Some of the nameless have been settling in smaller villages and setting up shop. Only, people from Water Country have no idea what to do about some of the natural illnesses that take place so far from home, so Rakki Ryuu has to assist.

In reality, nobody from the Mist had an immunity to the local bugs in the water, and there was also the change in diet to be considered. Ryuishi simply recommends barley tea and light broths for the sick patients, pointing out a few herbs that would help ease the light fevers and other symptoms, and tells them to boil the water heavily before drinking. Simple, clean cut, +10 to charisma. Yet, it had gone

horribly wrong sometime in the night. Months of hard work re-stabilizing herself almost came undone in a single moment when she was munching roast rabbit by the fire.

A shiver overtakes her, and the tendrils of nothing flex inside of her chakra and *scream*.

Her body seizes, and her heart feels awful, like maybe it has stopped beating inside her chest. The air is horrifying and full of a miasma that she can fucking feel inside her goddamn soul. Something has ripped through the fabric of life and summoned a monster who is not supposed to be in the land of the living. The world roars out its protests in a cacophony of sound that only she can hear, and the tendrils of the Void inside her spasm and shiver in protest. Black haze blurs into the corner of her vision, and her body feels tired and limp. Like... like it is overdosing on morphine.

Stop it, she thinks, whatever it is just stop .

October 10th, she remembers later, is not her birthday alone. It is in fact the day the Kyuubi attacked Konoha and brought it to its knees. It is the day that a bright, warm human child is born and made a into cage. It is the day that child's father, the Yondaime Hokage Namikaze Minato, uses an untested jutsu that could go horribly, disastrously wrong in a village full of people, and summons the God of Death into the world.

She feels it from hundreds of miles away. She would feel it from the other side of the fucking planet.

*It is not right, she thinks, what he has done is **wrongwrongwrong** .*

Just like her.

The next day she wakes up from passing out, and her hand is burnt from falling too close to the fire. A rock has been digging into her spine for however long she was unconscious and she is so very, very lucky that a patrol did not stumble upon her. Or another rogue

nin. Ryuishi knows there is an almost uncountable amount of things that could have happened when she was out. Her hair is a mess and she is hungry as fuck, but she is alive and stable and that means more to her than most will ever know.

She spends her year recovering and helping out where the tribe needs her, making sure to keep tabs on Kagami and Hanako.

Her old Okiya mother has traveled further north than some would imagine, and Ryuishi does not understand. She hates the cold and snow, but the aging Matron calls it her home. She settles with the few remaining girls she has in Lightning Country, setting up a brothel in a trade city not too far from the hidden village.

Ryuishi hates the journey to get there, because the terrain is treacherous and the air is thin. Spruce, pine, and cedar are all that grow in the snowy city in the mountains, and really, it is a huge bitch to get up that fucking egotistical hill. Kagami doesn't even need her help anyway, the woman has carved out a place for herself just fine. She takes in woodland lumberjack children and whips the local thugs into submission. The old hag has never looked so pleased to be alive and free from the Mist.

Every time the dark haired child shows her face, Kagami grins a cheshire grin that reminds her of steel and bitter root tea.

"Rakki Ryu," she would coo, plying her with sweets and comfort foods, "The Burner of Kiri, the People's Princess, and the Ningyo. I always knew you were lucky. Even the Slug Princess herself could win with you at her side."

Ryuishi really wishes she would stop. The titles are getting ridiculous.

If Kagami is bad, Hanako is worse. The little girl she taught has made her into something of a deity and spends her time wandering with the most loyal of the tribe, teaching nameless children of the whole world and flitting like a nomadic ghost across the landscape.

Sometimes she attaches herself to traders' caravans and blends in as a legitimate saleswoman, other times she uses tactics Ryuishi taught her to wander without a trace.

Last time she had found them it was by sheer coincidence and luck. The fierce, pious blond had grown up even more, fattened to a healthy state by the ripe fruits and numerous game of a newer, warmer climate.

" Everyone will know your words," Hanako tells her her, and she smiles serenely.

" I'm just a human, Hanako. It's nothing crazy," Ryuishi defends, uncomfortable with the praise.

" You're so humble, Ryu-hime."

It seems the blond is playing a dangerous game and putting her on a pedestal. She is making Ryuishi out to be a spiritual guide and vengeful guardian, and she isn't quite sure what to feel about it.

Maybe it was because she helped the child out from that terrible place, or perhaps it was the retribution she had helped them enact on the village? Could it be that the love she had shown the children had gotten this intense? It reminds her of the way people practiced faiths in her old world, full of awe and fear and ritual. Only, Hanako generally didn't start wars over her beliefs. Quite the opposite, in fact.

Ninja tended to either not be able to find them or leave them be, surprisingly enough. Harmless do-gooders in a world that can use them, but Ryuishi has a feeling the Kage and daimyo don't even realize how dangerous it is to let them keep spreading the good word. Already there are sanctions against smaller towns with human rights problems, and the leaders can't keep control without goods and services to dole out to the ranks.

Officially the Land of Rice Paddies is hit hard by the war, unofficially Ryuishi is undermining the lack of education that keeps them simple farmers and advocating worker's rights. In a few years, it will be the Land of Sound.

Whatever Hanako thought she was doing when she gave her a gift, Ryuishi doesn't know. But when she had accepted the woman's gift, Hanako lit up like a Hanukkah candle and blushed. Fucking *blushed*, for God's sake. The hair stick was very nice though, carved from some sort of bone and decorated with intricate designs and hand carved beads. She wears it with pride and a little trepidation.

It's probably mostly pride though, as the off-white contrasts really nicely with her black hair.

At thirteen, things are unsettlingly domestic.

"What are you doing?"

"Orochimaru-sama! When did you get here?" Ryuishi asks, carefully keeping an eye on the ingredients in the pan. There's sugar in there, and that shit burns real quick.

The older man sighs and glares down at the half naked woman-child wandering around his base. If he cared in the least about her behavior he would tell her it was improper, or that people would presume things if she continued not to wear tops. Then again, if she cared about propriety or modesty, she wouldn't be here in the first place.

As it stands, Orochimaru has no interest in a pubescent child and is almost completely apathetic to her eccentricities at this point. She does her jobs now that she is fixed, and she pulls her own weight.

"We have talked about this," he tells her with no small amount of exasperation.

" *You* have talked at me about it. I agreed to nothing."

"If you're going to cook, use the grease catcher."

She grumbles something under her breath, but he pins her with an icy, yellow eyed stare and she pulls the contraption out and uses it to cover the pan.

"Clean your mess before you leave or I'll rip out your tongue," he reprimands icily, gliding past her with a supernatural grace.

"Yes sir," she replies with a jaunty wave.

It occurs to her later that the whole exchange was rather... homely. It is an unsettling realization to come to. Has she really been getting so cozy with Orochimaru? She thinks back on the past interactions, the benevolent apathy they treat each other with.

This, she decides, cannot stand.

Once she gets the security of the major Hidden Villages scoped out and finds her way to get in, she is moving right the fuck out.

At fourteen, she moves out for good.

She is old enough to live outside the sphere of influence Orochimaru has crafted for her, and their separate goals are beginning to show themselves. It is unsafe for her to return to the den he has crafted, and she knows that he will let it happen. There is too much on his mind these days and she does not factor in much anymore. The two snakes have grown complacent in each others company. Why would they bite at each other when they have so many other areas to conquer first?

Bitterness and hatred have taken their toll on Orochimaru, and the new organization he joins is nothing she wants to be a part of. Yes, he will still have access to her network, but second hand and trickled

down. Yes, she still knows a few of his hideouts, but a fraction of the large amount. They gave little truths, bartered with pieces of a whole. Neither knew the big picture of the other and never the entire set of pieces they chose to play with. They weren't friends, enemies, teacher and student or anything else. Orochimaru and her, they were tradesmen who worked by exchanging goods. They will continue to be this way in the future.

It's not like she was in the hideout much anyway. To many connections to make, too much upkeep for her still green information network. Her busy spiders needed help with a web of this size, and she wants something that was more than a house or hideout. Ryuishi wants a space of her own to return to, somewhere familiar and warm.

Ryuishi wants a home.

So, she searches. It must be this big, it must be isolated, it must be secret, it must have running water and electricity. The weather must be warm and there has to be wildlife. She wants sun and sky and trees and nature to surround her in harmony, a tranquil spot she can run to when things are too hard. She has a lot of qualifiers for her future nesting place away from the world, and she will see to it that everything is perfect.

Eventually, she finds a place on the coast on the edge of the Land of Wind.

The house is near the treeline, surrounded on both sides by thick a mangrove swamp and a twisting bog that only appears in the high tide. Hot, shining white sand glistens under a warm sun for about a mile in front in either direction and the air is thick with the smell of saltwater and beach. To the north a towering cliff juts out, shielding her from harsher winds.

She loves the wooden house there. The salt encrusted paneling, the elevated porch. Even the high windows. Everything about it screams

out to her and begs her to claim it for her own. So she does, and then sets to make that property hers.

She spends a lot of time there, in between her travels, just doing little things. Sleeping in late and eating junk food, waltzing down the sand in a little black bikini some whores in River Country picked out for her, or nothing at all. She fishes in between the tangled roots of the bog and practices endurance in the hot sand. She twists and flips and jumps in the aquamarine blue sea, avoiding the colorful spine fish and warily eyeing the banded sea kraits.

Ryuishi cooks meals and stores ingredients and weapons. She picks up mementos and knickknacks from the nameless children and the whores and she decorates her home with them. A hanging scroll from a woman in Stone Country, a feather bracelet from a young boy in the Land of Noodles. Curtains from Kagami and a bedspread to match her luxurious, gigantic never want to leave bed.

(Hauling that thing from the Land of Rivers had been a bitch and a half, but so worth it.)

She hides eucalyptus and citronella in the corners of each room to ward off the hordes of bloodthirsty mosquitoes and scream-inducing cockroaches. Her collection of soaps and perfumes is starting to get ridiculous, as is her pile of eyeliners and lip stains. She doesn't even fucking care anymore because after living three years around Orochimaru, the world needs to see the wicked cateye she can pull off, and so what if she smells subtly? The stink of dirty people around her covers her scent almost as well as the ground pepper she soaks her sandals in.

After all, not even a nin dog can track when its nose is leaking mucus and it's eyes are watering.

She buys frames for her pictures and hangs the drawings of her family in her room, one by one. The photo of her and the boys she sets on her nightstand, and each time she wakes up in the morning she greets them all by name. She can never forget them, and the

love she holds for her family is too much to ever let go, but she learns to live again, learns to smile at the memories instead of weep. One day she hopes they will all meet again. She will do everything in her power to make it so.

Afterall, this is her world now, and she knows there is more than one way to travel dimensions in it.

At fifteen, she wakes up one morning and decides that it has been long enough.

Ryuishi's sabbatical has gone on for a long enough time, and she is roaring to pick back up her bag and wander the world and meet the people she has been meaning to meet.

Four years she has hidden away, laid low while the bounty hunters and loyal Kiri nin have tried to find her. Four years she has spent fixing her mind and gluing the pieces of herself back together. Four years she has spent building up a spy network of merchants and thugs and whores.

It is time for her to get back up, to force herself back into socializing and work.

She is fifteen, and there is a whole new world to explore. It is full of magic ninjas and fairy tale heroes, and she wants to meet everybody she can.

So, she puts on her old black cargo pants and new crop top. She paints on her wicked sharp eyeliner and stains her lips a dark plum. Her skin is bronze and beautiful from the sun and her shoulders and hips are wider from age. She feels confident, and damn if she doesn't look good.

There are babes to meet and kids to help, and she finally feels ready.

AN: SO this chapter is a bit of a mess, but a purposeful mess. If it skips around in tenses, it's to show how really fucked up Ryuishi is, even if she feels better. She is kind of mad at this point, and a maniacal villian who only cares about functionality isn't going to care to much as long as she does her job. This being said, I apologize if it is hard to read and for any grammar mistakes within. Also, this is a twin chapter to another that will be posted soon.

If you are curious to why she chose Orochimaru, please wait for the next chapter and then message me.

Thank you to all my readers. Your reviews keep me healthy and strong. Your favorites and follows keep me knowing that things will be okay.

Much love for the mistress of the beta's, enbi! She fixes my writing and totally undertook the pain of editing double chapters for this update.

Meeting Madness through Anothers Eyes

I do not own Naruto.

Orochimaru remembers the first day he ever saw the little girl who would break through the boundaries the world set up for her.

She was a small thing, young and fragile in comparison to the two boys beside her. Unimpressive in height and seemingly unremarkable in every way, she stood like a shadow beside her unit, dwarfed by their intimidating presence and aggressive aura. He remembers thinking that such a forgettable young child should have been sequestered away instead of paired with such an obvious assault team.

Now the oldest, the tall one with such obvious genetic mutations, yes, he could be of use. It would be interesting to see what secrets his DNA held, what possibilities could be unlocked by exploring the boy's blood.

A test, he decides on a whim. A test for the boy.

A test whose results he never finds out, for the kunai he had thrown at the boy instead struck that little, ordinary girl.

He had gone to leave, maybe observe the trio a little more before heading on his way, but that little girl, she made things interesting. She hid the obviously foreign weapon and searched through the crowd like she had known all along what was going to happen. Bleeding out on some dirty street in a little Water Country village, she had scanned for something, and when her eyes landed on him they had lit up. Not with surprise or fear, but with calculating recognition.

She, some unheard of child from the Mist, had not only heard of him, but recognized him on sight. And she told no one.

Instead, she patted the kunai she had hidden away and smiled.

I know, that grin said. Wouldn't you like to know how?

Mildly amused, he had seen it through. Curiosity was a trait he had always possessed, and something about the child made it awaken and unfurl inside of him. When the summon he had sent came back, a note in its mouth, she made his curiosity grow even further.

I died once, it read, and yet I am still alive .

It was as if that unremarkable, forgettable little brat knew him without even so much as an exchange of words. He wondered if this child's ramblings were just that, or perhaps it was a code, but there was no key.

A child who could live beyond death, something that made even him trepidatious. If she spoke the truth, then the limits were endless. She could be the key to his one desire, the way to overcome the frailty of mankind and pass beyond the limit that is mortality.

Even if she did not, a she was a curious little thing. A child born and raised in The Bloody Mist with knowledge of the world outside her borders and an understanding for subterfuge beyond her age. How was one so young so willing to begin communications with a known enemy shinobi? How did she know that the serpent was connected to him? Why did she recognize him, a complete stranger, in a crowd of fellow strangers?

With that, the ordinary little kunoichi became much more interesting.

Eventually he sends a missive back. The war requires him, and his team is not too far away in the Land of Rain taking out a dictator by the name of Hanzo. While Tsunade pines for Dan and mourns her brother and Jiraiya eases his guilt by training three brats, Orochimaru begins a sort of project of his own. He cultivates a road of communication with a little girl who writes too much like an adult for it to be a mistake and learns that all is not well in Kiri, and that

this little child has a mind as manipulative and ruthless as his own. Her words begin to paint a picture of a child much like himself at that age.

I am aware what you gain from your subtle questions, she writes at one point. If you are curious about the bloodline limits of Kiri, just ask. I am under no delusions that the information sent in previous letters has gone unnoticed, nor am I naive enough to think that you will not use that information for your own purposes. I simply do not care.

The vernacular and meticulous wording she uses smacks of child prodigy, and his interest is raised even further. Each letter becomes more like a report on the inside struggle of her village and the ways she turns this to her own advantage, or bits and pieces she thinks he will like. The handwriting is sloppy and sometimes there are bloodstains or mud on the papers, but such a willing gift of information cannot go ignored. Neither are the stories and delusions that sometimes pepper the notes, delusions so full of grandeur that he cannot decide if it is the overactive imagination of a child or the strange truth of an adult.

I was not always part of this country. I used to be a woman grown, one with a whole history and family. Then I died, and now I am here in this stagnant, oppressive hell. If you can discover how it happened, I encourage you to in every way. Maybe this nightmare can be of use to someone else.

He does not believe her, not really. Yet, he cannot ignore how much this child knows. Tsunade would write it off as a mental illness and even Jiraiya, who believes in fortune and prophecy, would have a hard time acknowledging this. There are signs though, the way she perceives things, the way she has yet to be caught, the way she is molding other children with such ease. These are not the actions of a seven year old, or even a teenager. These are deliberate schemes that not even a prodigy or genius could replicate, a subtle and conscious duplicity that a child should not know how to perform.

It titillates him to think about the possibilities of her conundrum, the manner of fooling the natural order of things and slipping through the cracks of the cosmos with his mind still intact. It would not matter where he was or how bad things became if he could retain his knowledge.

He is not dull enough to believe that this whole ordeal is for the sake of a young child's need for attention though, and eventually the point becomes obvious.

You are brilliant, and this is not simple ego feeding. You are smart and capable, and I am young in body and I will not always have the backing of this village to protect me. You know my plans, and the trade I am willing to make. When the time comes, I will need somebody to help pick up the pieces that are left.

She tells him of field missions, though she leaves out their purpose, but there are enough clues to figure out what is happening. He begins to rethink his first perception of her, the weak little girl surrounded by two hulking muscles. They have sent her to the frontlines, and she has not died. There are even rumors beginning to circulate of a trio of monsters that wear the guises of children. The irony of the statement makes him want to laugh. A grown woman and a monster hiding in a little girl's skin, surrounded by two legends. A trio of fighters known for their battle prowess. Truly, the parallels between them are making themselves more and more clear.

Sometimes they meet face to face, and there she never ceases to amuse, flitting away from her team with excuses of everyday problems or purposefully inciting arguments so that none will seek them out. He can see her trepidation when they interact, the intimidation he causes, but it becomes less and less every time and she learns to seek him out when she can turn to no other, to leave her morals behind and carry only her wit and manners when they meet. She is well spoken for her age, and the tremble leaves her voice as she grows more and more sure of her plans, of her purpose. Eventually she makes a mask just for him, and he smiles to see himself reflected in her empty eyes.

They call the girl Kiri no Ningyo, but he thinks that is not fitting. The child is not a mermaid, no, she is a snake.

The other moles he has in Kiri spin the same story with different words. She is a dunce, she is loud, she is brash, she is foul tempered and cares too much about strangers. Her disguise is good enough that most cannot tell that these are faces she wear, mannerisms she has copied to fit in among them, a camouflage to blend in with her prey.

This girl, this mere child has been turning things on their head and no one notices because it is such a slow and secret change. He would be hard pressed to see the differences if she had not laid them out flat herself, if only because her actions take place so far away.

Then... then she does the impossible. She breaks through the glass ceiling that no one else even noticed and burns an entire city to the ground. He knows what her plans were, he knows that it was spoken of, but to see it, ah, to see the ashen remains themselves is an entirely different thing. She steps through the planning stages and effortlessly makes her words a reality, and he has never been more interested in a single person.

He laughs when the message he receives soon after details out the route of the kekkai genkai users who escaped in the chaos.

I have kept my bargain. Steal them or charm them, they are yours, she writes and he has never been more delighted. A trader who deals in both truth and lies, and she offers him gifts of genetic silver and gold.

So he uphold his own end, though he never said he would. He takes off, leaving excuses for his old teacher. It is not as if the old man or the new young Hokage can stop him. His own teammates abandoned that godforsaken village first, abandoned *him* first. This is him beginning to return the favor.

He follows a subtle trail winding across countries, through borders and frontlines. It is not one he would find if he did not know what to look for. There are no rookie mistakes, no cooling campfire hidden under dirt, not spots with trampled grass from where she has bedded down. No litter, no rations wrappers, no weapons oil smell or carcass remains. There is only a certain lack of foragable food and a few long black hairs in some places and rumors of missing goods. In the beginning, trying to find her is like trying to catch smoke in his hands.

Eventually though, she slips up and actual reports of stolen goods come up. Little things, but mostly stolen alcohol and shards of broken ceramic half buried in the ground. The picture becomes bleaker as time goes on.

When he finds her, she is nothing like the composed young girl he has come to know. She looks more like a corpse in that ditch than a human being. When he passes orders her eyes stray to the side, pupils dilated and breath heavy with the smell of alcohol. She is seeing things that are not there, eyes tracking movements he cannot see and muscles tensing with paranoia. Heavy bags hang on her face and mud and filth cling to her clothes like a second skin.

She is ruined from whatever has taken place, brought low to the very foundation of her being.

It is more opportune than one might think. This way he has a chance to build her up, a chance to make her more suitable for his own purposes. So, he sequesters her away from the world and begins the tiring process of remaking her as he sees fit. In her moments of lucid thought he can tell that she knows what he is doing, understands his schemes in ways many would not, and she accepts them no matter the damage they will do. She is quiet as he pushes her past her physical limits and he learns first hand how she survived so long. She fights with no rules, ruthless and full of cheap tricks and pot shots.

"There is no honor in battle," she tells him, her eyes glazed and turned towards the night sky, "There is only a winner and corpses."

Still, she is leagues below him, but he can see the potential in her, the mighty tool that she could become. When he takes samples from her, it is under the guise of examining her chemistry to assist her ailing mental state, when in reality he is testing her ability to become his host body. She gives them willingly and silently until he reaches for her chakra.

"There's something wrong in my system. The Void infected me when I was there."

He doesn't believe that she died, no, but he has never seen something like this before. It is proof that her story might not be all fantasy, evidence to support her outlandish claims. He studies this mystery with a thoroughness and vigor he reserves for scientific impossibility.

Her chakra is an anomaly, something not linked to any phenomenon he has seen. It does not act like any Kekkei Genkai he has studied before, no outward manifestations of this ability. The eye slides off of spaces gone unfilled in the sample and recordings and photographs record the same thing, a peculiar emptiness when there should be none. Staring too long causes his stomach to roil and clench with some sort of foreboding.

It is not natural, he thinks, to have such a static contamination in one's body .

Indeed, it does contaminate her whole body. When he scans her he discovers that all of her Eight Gates are infected with sleeves and tentacles of negative space, and whatever he tries to do with them, they simply absorb it, eating at it hungrily. He wonders what a dojutsu user would see if they tried to look at her. If a single sample piece is so difficult to observe, what would her chakra system look like to the naked eye without the charts and printouts to dull the blow? How would a Hyuuga, a clan that prizes itself on perfect vision, react to the absence of anything at all? Could the Sharingan cast the ultimate genjutsu on a brain that has tendrils of hollowness interspersed with veins and energy paths?

The information is lost to him without said bloodlines, and he has to wait to find out.

"Does it do anything?" he asks her once, and she gives him a trepidatious look before staring at her hands, her eyes looking at something he cannot see. Slowly but surely his treatment is working, and she sticks to it with an almost religious fervor, a desperate climb to become functional once more.

"I think it makes people see The Void when I use genjutsu," she says, blinking slowly. "And I can feel death in people when I touch their bodies. I can feel everything leave their bodies behind when they die. Even from far away I can tell where a lot of people have passed away. Like battlefields or massacres, I can feel the hole where life should be."

"Poetic," he replies, "but ultimately useless."

She shrugs and smiles bitterly to herself. "Pretty fucking much. You don't have to tell me."

Orochimaru continues his studies anyway because there is no evolution like this out there, and it drives him to distraction if he leaves it alone for too long. He discovers the strange and intricate seal that spans the length of her back and becomes enraptured by the idea that one could be born into this world with such a thing on their skin, more intricate than any clan marking.

The swirling lines of the colorless fox, the sleek lines of the black jaguar, all encircled in the bones of a mighty serpent. The piece centers in her shoulders and the snake weaves down around to the bottom of the spine, it's head ready to strike. It is not ink, or melanin deposits, or any other material he knows, but it seems as much as skin as the rest of her. Another enigma, another note of interest.

The jagged, broken pieces of her come together slowly, a healing process that takes more time than most are willing to give. He wouldn't give it either if she was not already so influential, so very

useful. Even without her there to guide them, her children, the self proclaimed tribes, are gaining footholds in every nation in the world. They call themselves Mumei, the anonymous, the nameless. They spread like locusts, living off the land, settling where they please. The local Yakuza does not turn them away, because they come bearing offerings of business and blend seamlessly with the local lowlife. Shinobi ignore them because they seem like refugees of working age and merchants with goods to sell, civilians with only survival and greed as motivators, but they all answer to the child under his roof.

They call her Rakki Ryuu, and he laughs to see such an obvious clue go unnoticed by so many. Though the broken girl's name has the same sound, there is no character for dragon inside her name. She is flowing stone, a contradiction if he ever heard one, and they are sycophantic in their devotion to her. The feathers and bones, the paints and the lessons, they mark themselves in different ways. He can see young men and women with dragon tattoos and children with bird skulls and eel bones, and if he did not know better he would think it was some gutter fashion.

We deserve to live just because we are, they say, and he finds this endlessly amusing because the girl he knows, she is a murderer and a liar with no thought for the sanctity of life. She taught them to feed themselves and hide for her own purposes, and they love her for it. It is a game he knows well, and even for him it seems like a masterful stroke of manipulation.

He watches her heal, this little slip of a child. Observes her as she comes back from the brink of destruction. She goes from a jittery, paranoid, insomniac mess who weeps at random intervals and stares into the heart of darkness, to a young woman with strength at her fists and poison on her tongue. He matches wits and finds her words merciless and dissecting but never overly so, pushes her strength until she can slip through cities unseen and form serpents from lakes.

It becomes time to let her go and test her, to see if she remains true. The contract is done, but they both know that there is no ridding themselves of the other.

She goes out and finds him willing subjects for experimentation, a control group of the lost and broken hearted, the weak minded and the ones beyond repair. She puts the quiet word out for those who will suit his needs and she gifts them to him. His data increases by leaps and bounds.

She brings him back information in bundles, rumors from whores in the mountainous Kumo and merchants in Suna. Traders follow her advice and sell to those she points them to with goods she has recommended. She rakes in wealth like most will never see and plays the markets like a pachinko game.

She comes back, and she shares it with him.

"I figure I'm behind on rent," she jokes, steel in her eyes, "and medical expenses."

Orochimaru takes a gamble on a broken mess of a child from the remains of the Bloody Mist, and he wins bigger than his female teammate could have ever imagined. She shows herself to be even better than a tool or a simple weapon, because she thinks and maneuvers and has a will of her own. She defers to him because of respect, not fear, and acknowledges his intelligence, his skill.

He thinks he once had a good student, a child with plum hair and a love of dango. But now he has a trusted administrator, a representative to the public at large.

He looks at her now and can hardly see the cracks between the pieces he himself mended together. Her questions and inquiries are subtle, the personalities blending into one. The viewpoints are valid and flowing instead of jagged and nonsensical. A piece of her asks why, another how, another when and who. An endless stream of thought searching out answers all at once, a tangled web with a

single center that spirals out into something enormous. She sees a person's actions, finds their reasons, discovers why their reasons are there. She is understanding of people in the same way he is. They see the parts that form them and fit together like a puzzle, the stones and brick that create the foundation. In knowing, they can figure out which stone to pull, which words will sway them, which appearance to put on.

When he goes into the darkness and joins the new dawn, the Akatsuki, he is bitter and spiteful. They part paths without words and she finds a den of her own, but she never tells a soul about his bases, his secrets. She keeps her kinship with him quiet, never boasting or telling. It is another sign of respect, he thinks. Even with no morals and a vicious, self serving outlook on life itself, she does not betray him and keeps his confidence. Still she allows him to acquire information from the Mumei. She distances herself, but never severs the ties.

He knows that it is because he will one day come back.

AN: Part two of the double update! This time things from Orochimaru's POV. I know it seems like a little to deal with such a large time skip, but please remember that time is hard to keep track of when your insane and or apathetic. For people asking where Orochimaru and her deals were hinted at please check chapter 15, and Chapter 22.

The name Rakki Ryuu is wordplay, because Ryuu is a homophone. It sounds like the character used for dragon. Instead, in her name it means flow. Ishi means stone. So Ryuishi is the flowing stone.

A big thanks for all my readers, a phat kiss for all my reviewers, and anything she wants to my beautiful beta Enbi, who edited two chapters on short notice.

Meeting the Red Headed Child

I do not own Naruto.

Ryuishi thinks that it is much easier to sneak into the Village Hidden in the Sand than it should be. Seriously, the security here has nothing on the security of a post 9/11 world. The TSA was much more grabby than the professional shinobi on gate duty. The tall, dark skinned gentleman is surly and stoic and he would be good at his job, if he had been chosen to be a hall monitor instead of a border guard. Really, he doesn't even check the pin in her hair. Theoretically, she could have hidden at least an ounce of dope inside if she had hollowed it out. Does he even know how much the good stuff could go for on the streets these days?

Well, nothing that impressive, but still! It's the spirit of the whole thing.

Also, if she's going to keep bitching, which she is, she is going to have to say that Village security as a whole could do a lot better. There's probably a damn good reason the motherfucking Akatsuki can waltz right into Konoha. There is a truly amazing amount of holes in the Elemental Nations security protocols, and she is determined to exploit them all. As a veteran dealer who often had to deal with not only local authorities, but border ones as well, these guys are a huge disappointment.

How much deeper do they need to dig in her pockets? What's she gonna hide in there? Shuriken? Kunai? Jutsu scrolls? A diary detailing her treacherous plots for world domination?

The answer is... a lot of candy. Regular candy, too. No gooey hashish packed centers or secret coke-filled insides. Just a bunch of gummies and lollipops. She never could kick the habit of carrying food everywhere on her.

She smiles what she knows to be a dazzling smile at the man. She didn't practice in front of the mirror just for fun. Again, she cannot express how simple this is compared to traveling in a world where X-ray machines were the last thing you had to worry about when smuggling.

"You can have some if you'd like," she tells him sweetly before gesturing to her pack, which is being pawed through by a disgruntled looking woman. The pile of food she is still pulling out is getting pretty big. "I have a lot."

He grunts and eyes her carefully before pocketing some of the lemon flavored suckers, his glare boring into her and promising pain if she so much as moves. She continues her grin and pops her gum inside her mouth.

"Merchant's license?" he asks, and she points to a folder underneath her bug-out bag, stamped with an official looking seal. Which is also forged. There are no watermarks on documents, just stamps from nobles and officials. Easily traceable and simple enough to make a negative, and if you know the right people, they could even put the number in a foreign library for you. This world would be hers for the taking if she ever wanted to deal drugs again.

A few more tedious and time consuming checkpoints, a small wait period, and Ryuishi is inside the giant basin of Sunagakure under a pseudonym, posing as a food merchant from Rice Country. Any background checks on the file will come up with multiple other harmless but desirable trade goods, and a booming business that needs to expand. But in reality, she's just so fucking ready to find a little redheaded brat. All reports from the city say that he's already a pariah under the care of his uncle, who is gone most of the day, and that not even the local ANBU watch over him. Security is really lax for a kid who has the so-called 'ultimate defense'.

Not that ANBU would be too much of a problem. The way the system works is a bit weird here, and it's more for internal control than eradication of external forces. When she watched the anime, it

seemed like ANBU was a rank above jounin to her, but that couldn't be farther from the truth.

ANBU are selected from every rank in a shinobi force, from genin and up. The only difference is that an ANBU operative answers directly to the Kage themselves instead of a higher ranking commander. Their job is to take on missions with political undercurrents, things that could reflect badly on the country's Daimyo and other military leaders. They also work within the shinobi forces, always looking out for spies or traitors, weeding out those with weaker convictions and disloyal thoughts. In essence, they are the secret police of this world. They can't be arrested by normal peacekeeping forces, and all errant behavior is dealt with by their superiors in ANBU or the Kage themselves. They are above the law to an extent, and most definitely above the everyday ninja and civilian.

They drag up memories of her old world and shady government thugs. The Stasi of Cold War Eastern Germany or the Santebal under the rule of the Khmer Rouge in Cambodia. Even the infamous Gestapo. In all, she wouldn't trust one as far as she could throw them. Thinking about it more, in her case, she could probably throw them pretty far. So, she just wouldn't trust them, then.

She books her hotel and tries to change her thought process, instead picking up the trail of a certain jinchuuriki.

To her, all the sandstone dome buildings of Suna look vaguely like boobs. It makes searching the city a whole lot more entertaining than it usually would be, and almost makes the dry heat bearable. The only real bitch she has about the city is that the basin shape that holds them also funnels wind through each road and alleyway, blowing sand straight into her fucking eyes. If she wasn't so used to sandy beaches, the dust would be a real problem too. As it stands, the walled city is much cleaner than Kiri ever was, and much hotter too. The dry air would ruin her skin if she hadn't thought ahead and bought lotions and oils like crazy.

She passes a lot of kids and women on her way through, and each one begs to have some of the sweets she pretends to be peddling out of a basket. The parents look on and always, always ask about the prices.

The war hit this place like a suckerpunch to the testicles, and as a people completely dependent on imported goods, the economic crash after it ended hit them hard. The desert doesn't have a lot to trade with, and most of their goods aren't even produced near this city at all. The pomegranates are from a little farther west, the citrus from the coast and the dates and figs are from even farther south. Other than that, the only thing else they have to trade is shinobi and gold dust, the latter of which has to be carefully controlled. If the Fourth Kazekage floods the market, prices will drop and he won't be able to keep this village afloat. The military center of Wind Country stands on a delicate precipice, and to drop would mean a full out depression. In a place where you have to move water in from other countries or mine it from aquifers thousands of feet in the ground, that means nothing good.

Most times she has to keep up the merchant act, stingy and unwilling to drop the price too low, but somehow the kids end up with candy anyway. The parents are stern faced at the assumed charity, but when she tells them that her brothers had been lost in the war at a young age they smile sadly and accept it anyway. As if it were an act of kindness to her, instead of the other way around.

Joke's on them, though. Their kids are going to go nuts with the amount of sugar she gives them, and she isn't going to be the one who has to deal with it.

Eventually, she winds her way towards one park in particular, resting in the shadow of the Kazekage's tower. It is almost empty, save for a group of children playing some sort of made-up game in the morning air, and one little boy playing alone on a swing set.

Bingo.

Okay, she tells herself, play it cool. You've been planning this out for years. Don't come off too strong, don't be creepy. You got this.

She pumps herself up in the quiet of her mind, before stepping toward the little red headed boy.

She wants to fucking squeal as soon as he looks up, this little four year old jinchuuriki. His eyes are the craziest sea foam green color, and they are so wide, so big it's fucking insane. Already they are rimmed with black, and she feels a pang in her heart. This poor child, this poor poor baby.

"Hello, would you like some candy?" she asks, outstretching her basket. *Not creepy, she tells herself, don't be creepy. It's only weird if you make it weird.*

He makes some sort of sound, clutching the chain of the swing tighter, and he curls into himself, away from her. His colorful orbs are sizing her up, wary and unsure. The wind ruffles the tufts of his crimson hair and god *damn* that shit is so cute. She is going to fill an entire book of cute pictures of this kid.

Don't be creepy, don't be creepy, don't be creepy, she chants inside her head.

"Uncle Yashamaru says not to take candy from strangers," he tells her softly.

Hot damn, why couldn't Kisame or Zabuza be this adorable? She would have gotten along with them so much better if they had been cuter. Hanako was a dirty, starving, foul mouthed orphan when they first met, too. Is it puberty making her want to coddle him, or has there always been this weakness for small children lurking inside her? She is somewhat worried about the answer to that.

Her smile falters a bit at the negative answer, and she backs up, her eyes sliding to the group of children playing in the distance.

"Well..." she continues, "We could play with that red ball you have there. Everybody can see us, so I can't do anything bad, and then we won't be strangers anymore," she answers, sweeping her arm toward the object. She has to get close to him this way. She would kidnap him, but he has that stupid fucking sand and she isn't strong enough to steal a rampaging jinchuuriki. Not yet. Probably not ever. That shit sounds pretty exhausting.

He flicks his eyes towards the ball, then back to her, measuring the danger of the situation. His face is trying to be stoic, a cover for the timidity and caution she sees in his eyes, but fails, and instead he looks like he can't decide if he's anxious or has forgotten something important.

"Aren't you too old to play?" he asks, and man, this child is well spoken for a kid that just quit sucking boob a few years ago. No wonder everyone thought she was weird, because seeing a child act so adult is fundamentally strange.

"You're never too old to play a game of catch," she tells him.

He brightens a bit, and it's soft and subtle like a moonbeam, but it makes her smile in return. It's not a smile on his face, but something a bit more refreshing. She thinks they call it hope.

One mission goal accomplished, now don't fuck this up, she commands herself. She lays her basket of sweets by the corner of the swing as he slides off into the sand quietly, and she picks up the ball lying on the ground.

He stands across from her, hands open awkwardly like he has never played this game before. In fact, he looks awkward in general, still wary and watching her. It feels like he is simply waiting for her to give him an excuse. It makes her sad to think that statement is probably true. Poor little mentally unstable child soldier in training.

"Catch!" she calls out, gently tossing the red sphere toward him.

Almost faster than she can track, a wall of sand erupts from the ground and snatches the toy out of the air, swallowing it into a blob of stone particles. She realizes suddenly that reading it in the manga and watching anime has done nothing to prepare her for how fucking intimidating the very action is. The kid can use the earth itself to swallow anyone whole. He moves the ground beneath her feet and rises it into the air above with such ease, a mere whim on his part. Every bit of the terrain around him can become his weapon, his tool for murder.

"Holy *shit*," she whispers.

"Catch!" a voice calls and the sand opens up. Out of it emerges a flying crimson missile heading straight for her, and in her awe, she is unprepared for the assault.

It catches her straight in the chest and sends her sliding back on the shifting grains. The air leaves her lungs from the force of the rubber ball colliding into her ribs, and she has time to think about how insane it is that a playground toy could do so much damage. She hears screams as she hunches over and plants her hands on her knees, desperately trying to breathe again and not vomit. She sounds like a dying carp. This is not what she had planned on happening. Is she going to be remembered like this?

Yes Gaara, remember the lady you took out with a toy? She was the Kiri no Ningyo, a legendary fighter and missing nin. Her ego is bruised, along with her ribs.

She peeks up through her hair at the young redhead, and he is staring at her with wide eyes. He looks afraid for some reason, like she is about to return the favor and catapult the ball right back at him. Ryuishi is sorely tempted, but manages to stick to the plan.

The kids playing in the distance have taken off, and that must be what she heard earlier. They must have been scared by the village pariah taking out a foreign merchant. She hopes that they keep their mouths shut.

Gaara looks even smaller with no one around. So lost, so lonely.

"Holy shit, kid," she finally chokes out. "That is one hell of a throw."

He gasps slightly, but some of the fear leaves his eyes. Instead it is replaced by wary glances to the buildings around him, as if someone is going to pop out and punish her.

"You said a bad word," he tells her sternly, and she laughs because shit, he's got a point.

"Sorry," she croaks, trying to ignore her screeching torso. She bends down further and picks the ball back up, holding it out for him. "Go easy on me this time?" she asks.

He looks at her then, and she realizes what he was afraid of. This little boy was afraid she would run away and leave him here alone. He is wary of her because so many people have reacted negatively to him, have left him neglected and forgotten.

Well, she has news for this boy. Zabuza stabbed her in the calf and fucking scarred her for life, from back to ass to leg, and she still considers him a friend. Kisame literally tried to kill her, and she would *still* stand by his side. It takes a lot more than a little bruise for her to quit when she has an idea in her head.

"Well?" she says, tossing the ball towards him. He looks floored by her simple words, stunned by her willingness to play a game with him. The sand catches the ball anyway.

He smiles at her, and she wants to bottle that shit and sell it as a drug. Really, she has such a weakness for cute kids.

The ball hurtles towards her at breakneck speeds once again.

Gaara doesn't understand the girl sitting across from him, lounging in a pool of water she says she had 'happened to come across' last

night.

He doesn't understand her one bit.

It just doesn't make sense, wanting to play with someone like him. At first he thought she was one of those strangers that Uncle Yashamaru warned him about, the ones that like little kids too much, and that was why she tried to give him candy. But when he said no, she offered to play where everyone could see. Bad people don't do stuff like that to make a kid feel safer.

He was happy, so happy that somebody wanted to play a game with him, so he agreed. Then he had messed up, and he knew it hurt when the ball hit her. He didn't know how, because he didn't know what pain was like, but he knew because the sound she made was the same sound Temari made when she got hurt. The one that sounded like hot soup going down the sink.

He had been so scared. The lady was going to turn angry and say mean things. She was going to go away, and he wouldn't see her. He wouldn't get to play with anyone ever again. Instead though, she had said a bad word and got back up and kept playing. Even after she got hurt more she got back up and kept on playing with him. When he had asked her why, she told him something weird.

"The first time I made a friend, he hit me with his bokken in the ribs and made me throw up. The next time I made a friend, he pulled my hair and threw me to the ground. They both have saved my life countless times since then," she had said, dodging out of the way of another ball. "Pain seems to indicate levels of friendship for me, I guess."

Gaara knows for a fact that that isn't the way people are supposed to make friends. Uncle Yashamaru told him so. Still, they played catch right until lunchtime, when he had to go home.

It was a good day, even though she was weird, and he was happy it happened, even if the thing inside his belly didn't like being around

her. He stayed up that night and let the feeling of fluttery stomachs and stretched cheeks from smiles fill him up, and the thing inside him was a little quieter that night.

The next day was even better though, because she was there again! She looked a little purple and blue in some places, but she walked right up to him like she wasn't even afraid and picked him up. She carried him on her hip right to the front of a food stall.

"I never got your name, little guy," she told him as a boy with feathers in his hair served them spicy gizzards and lizard tongue.

He realized he hadn't gotten hers either and stared at his feet in shame. Oh, Uncle was going to be disappointed in him again and would say he had bad manners. He didn't mean to!

"I'm Gaara," he told her with a polite bow of his head.

"And I'm... well, you can call me Aneue."

Big sister, he thought. She was much nicer than Temari, and weirder too, but somehow it still fit.

Then they ate, and he had never seen someone eat so fast! It was like somebody was gonna steal it, so she had to protect it from thieves. Gaara learned that day that Aneue could eat a lot, and eat it fast.

(Years of living on meager Mist rations surrounded by two aggressive teenage boys will teach someone that.)

After eating, she had picked him up again, and they went back to the park where she pushed him on the swing. Sometimes, if her hands got close too fast, his sand would react, and by the end he could see burns and scrapes from it. Still, she didn't say a word and just smiled at him like he was something special to her, and he felt something funny in his chest.

He came back the next day, and the next, and the one after that. Whenever he wasn't training with father or learning with Uncle, he was there in the park with her, playing games. It was nice, he thought, to have a friend. She didn't talk when he didn't want to talk, and sometimes they just stayed in the park, playing a game she called Uno with colorful cards. Sometimes, she'd let him help her sell candy. They never sold very much from what he saw, and sometimes people looked at them weird, but she never cared. She just made a weird hand sign at them, and they turned red and walked away.

He told Uncle about her once, said he had made a friend with a girl who smelled like flowers and blood. He didn't think he got taken seriously though, because Uncle said that he'd had an imaginary friend once, too. To prove his point, Gaara showed him the hand sign she used, and he had never been scolded so hard in his life. He didn't know what a 'red light district' was, but he assured his Uncle he had never been there, and after that he didn't talk about her much anymore.

Today she came and picked him up, talking about a big pool she found in one of the training fields. He doesn't know how she was allowed to go in the training fields, because she sells candy and only ninja are supposed to go in there, but there they were. In a training field, by a pool that must be as big as four houses, which is weird because it hasn't rained in forever.

She is trying to teach him how to swim too, but the sand comes off of him and he gets scared, so she sets him up on a raft like hers and lets him sit there.

Gaara finds that he likes watching her swim a lot more than doing it himself, anyways. She looks like the fishes he sees in tanks at the market sometimes, and the smiles she is giving him make his belly wiggle. He doesn't know why it does that, just like he doesn't know why she is here. Fish shouldn't be in the desert. People don't make friends with people who hurt them, don't play games with them like she does. Nice people don't say bad words, but Aneue says them a lot.

"Aneue?" he asks, and she glides over to the side of his raft with curious dark eyes, her long black hair floating like snakes around them.

"What, Gaara?" she answers him. Usually the kid is as quiet as the grave, so him talking is a small miracle.

"Why are you here?"

"Oh, like in Suna? Or in the water? Or with you?"

He thinks for a bit, and she stares at him, waiting. "All," he says bluntly.

"All?" she queries. He nods.

She is raising an eyebrow and making a funny face at him again. She makes them a lot, just like she says bad words a lot. It's very different from the faces he knows from the market district and at home, the ones that are smooth like sandstone and hard to read. Hers is like a picture book, only sometimes the pictures don't go with the words and nothing makes sense.

"Okay then," she says, holding up her hands and ticking fingers off. "I'm in Suna to sell candy, only I've been distracted by a little boy who needs to smile more often, because he seriously bums me the fuck out sometimes. I'm in the water because it's hot as balls outside, and this is here, so why not use it? Aaaand I'm here with you because somebody has to teach you how to have fun. Also, you looked kinda lonely."

He gives her a bland look for her commentary and use of foul language. Yashamaru says that cursing is not only unbecoming of a lady but a sign of improper manners as well.

Although... he might forgive her, because Gaara was lonely and now he's not.

Now he has Aneue.

AN: SO, a huge jump and a chapter showing a the old fun and giggle Ryuishi coming back from all that angst. It might seem like a jump in other ways too, because how could she get in so clean, how could she befriend Gaara so fast? My answer is that it has been said in other chapters that Ryuishi has been probing security for literal years when she spent time with Orochimaru and running missions. She has been prepping for more big plans, most of which will be centered around more canon characters. As for Gaara... he is four. He canonically doesn't get crazy till six and until then is an outcast and village paraia, starving for attention and affection. It's also Suna, not Kiri, so kids can afford to be more trusting. If you have any other questions, please pm me, I am happy to answer them.

THANK YOU to all my Reviewers. Many blessings on my readers, favoriters, followers, and lurkers. Big kisses all around.

We offer thanks to the great Beta Enbi who had to fix all the tenses in this chapter. It was seriously bad, so she put a lot of hard work in this. Bless her.

Meeting Sandcastles and Nostalgia

I do not own Naruto. Or Ali Baba, or Harry Potter, or The Secret of Kells.

A spherical prison of water and a familiar blue face covered in blood and bruises. "I guess in the end, I wasn't such a horrible human after all." Summons turning against their contractor, an open mouth full of serrated teeth going for her friend's head, a sad accepting smile.

Ryuishi wakes up in a cold sweat, tangled up in the thin hotel blanket. The hot desert sun is high and bright in the sky outside the hotel window, and its light shines down, warming her flushed skin.

"Fuck," she whispers breathlessly. "Dick balls, shitface, cunt truck, fuck fire." The cursing helps keep the images away and relieves some of the tension she can feel in her shoulders.

She hates dreaming those dreams, the ones where she witnesses her unit's death in flat, two-dimensional, animated scenes. They really should just stop. It's not like she's forgotten about them, it's only been a few years.

She sighs loudly and slowly gets up, pushing the slightly damp sheets off of her and grimacing at the feel of sweat soaked hair against her skin. It clings like inky tentacles to her neck and face, and when she sits up she can feel the loose strands near her hips. She must have forgotten to put it up in a braid last night.

The bed underneath her isn't the soft monstrosity she has at home, but the springs aren't sticking out and most of the firmness is still there. She savors the feeling of something other than hot sand or sunbaked furniture under her ass for a few seconds more. The seating options in Suna really aren't the best, she thinks to herself as she processes the real world instead of the dream. They should do

something about the flaming hot surfaces around here. Her cheek meat is tender and burnt from all the bad options, even with the pants she wears. Groggily standing up at her own leisurely, lethargic pace, she stomps toward the shower. She doesn't have much to do other than explore and entertain an adorable four year old with attachment issues, so she can take all the time she wants. A benefit of not being affiliated with any villages and taking only the missions she wants, one could say, because no one can order her to do anything. No early morning wake ups or late night alarms, she gets to do whatever the hell she pleases, as she pleases.

It's not the same without internet and TV, but it's still pretty great.

She makes it to the shower, which is shoddy as hell. The water pressure sucks and it takes a while for it to permeate her thick hair, but she spends the time lathering up with some of her soap collection and cleaning herself off. She leaves the shaving and manscaping for when she has her conditioner in her hair, so it can soak in. So she kills twenty minutes in the water, preparing herself for the hot, dry terrain outside. Then she kills another twenty brushing her teeth and lounging around the place naked, enjoying the feel of blanket against skin and running her hands over her freshly shaved and lotioned legs. She wants to ask somebody to touch them. Even with the scars that stripe her skin and make it pucker and stretch in odd ways, they are so soft. Ridiculously soft. Then, finally, she wastes even more time putting on her liquid liner and fixing her hair.

She looks great, she thinks to herself, like always. Fuck anyone who says otherwise. Her opinion on the matter is all that mattered anyway, and she's glad that she can see that this time around.

Last time she went through puberty, it had been such a bitch. The influx of chemicals and hormones in her body had left her awkward and unsure, constantly doubting herself and her appearance. At the time she could remember being self conscious of the dusting of scars on her knuckles, and the way her legs looked like a patchwork of marks and bruises. She had felt her that breasts were too small

and her ribs too wide. She hated the way fat gathered on her hips and thighs, the way her pores seemed too big and eyes too small. Her broad, muscular shoulders and heavy upper body strength seemed mannish and off putting to herself.

Now, she knows better. Every scar is a burst of color to help her remember the story behind it, and every bruise is a tale of something that she has overcome. Her breasts aren't the largest, but they are nice, and her wide ribs are better for taking strong hits anyways. The fat on her waist gives her body movement, a soft, inviting squish. Her eyes are narrow, yes, but they are vicious and nobody cares about the size of her pores anyway. Her muscular and broad build is a tribute to the strength she carries and is nothing to be ashamed of. She can kill a man with her thighs and knock a person out with a well aimed punch.

She is confident in herself, the way she always should have been. Finally comfortable in her own skin.

She flashes herself a smile in the mirror and picks up her bag, making her way to a now familiar park. The day is exceedingly hot like always, and she can see visible warps in the air around the burnt beige sandstone buildings. A strong wind howls through the streets and tangles in the inky bangs of her hair, and she closes her eyes, appreciating the smell of it. It is not grimy and rotting, the stifling stink of Kiri. Instead it smells of dust and heat, triggering half-remembered nights spent camping in the desert in another world.

A pang shoots through her heart, and she does not shove it down and away like her instinctual reaction tells her to do. Yes, she misses them. No, she cannot have them. She must treasure the time they spent together and move on. There is a child who needs her and, and there are two men somewhere far away that she needs to protect, whether they know it or not.

She feels it in her heart, the love she has for her old unit. It hurts a lot, but she wouldn't trade it for the world. She misses them, and she

says a quick prayer in her mind for them. She hopes they are smiling at a lame dick joke right now.

(Zabuza itches his ear, currently frustratedly teaching a small boy how to throw needles. It is agonizing, and the poor show makes him remember a girl who really sucked at throwing things. Thinking about it, they both have nice hair too.

Kisame sneezes and wonders who's thinking about him right now, because it is very inconvenient. If he gets caught by the enemy right now, this mission will be nowhere as near as subtle as it needs to be.)

She continues on her way, cutting through main streets and market squares, passing out candy to kids who have become regulars in the short span of a week. They shout for her with calls of 'Nee-san!' and beg for the more sour of her collection. There is something about desert inhabitants that makes them enjoy strong flavors.

She finishes and then heads toward the park, her loping, easy pace eating up the small distance. When she gets there, she hops on a swing for old times' sake and kicks her feet for a while, enjoying the swaying motion until she hears a familiar pattern of footsteps heading towards her.

Large, seafoam green eyes look up at her with a disapproving light to them, thin lips turned down in a frown. "You're too big for the swings, Aneue. They'll break."

"Are you calling me fat, Gaara-kun?" she asks, slowing down to raise a brow at him.

"Aneue isn't fat, she's just too old," he corrects, and she clutches her heart dramatically and stands at this accusation.

"You're right Gaara, I'm much too old," she states with flair, shuffling towards the small boy, "So old my bones can't even hold me up anymore. Oh, no! Gravity!"

She wilts over the small boy, intending to collapse on him like a limp noodle. Instead of a squalling child cushioning her though, a pillow of sand catches her sinking body. The shifting grains feel a bit too much like gritty bugs crawling across her skin for comfort, but at least the mass as a whole conforms to the shape of her body this time. Last time she fell on him, it was like slapping against a boulder.

She sighs and pats the sand like it is a living thing. "Gaara-kun," she says, "We talked about this."

He stares at her without saying a word, but his eyes tell another story. Something like, 'then don't fall so much, you weirdo.'

Thus begins their day of entertainment. Somehow, and she isn't entirely sure how, the end up making sandcastles. With a trowel and a bucket that she had somehow picked up along the way (she stole it from some other little kids when they weren't looking), they set out for the shadows of the bluffs, where the sand is loosest and easiest to mold.

"Why are we building lumps again?" Gaara asks, squeezing a clump of wet mud through his pudgy little hands as she smooths a corner of the wall.

"First of all, this is a castle, not a fucking lump."

"You said a bad word again," he chides.

She rolls her eyes and continues. She is ridiculously proud of getting the texture just right with gratuitous use of Suiton jutsu behind Gaara's turned back. He didn't question why the sand was suddenly wet, and accepted it with all the grace and nonchalance of a four year old.

"Secondly," she states, ignoring him completely, "Building sandcastles is fun. When I was a kid, my mom and dad..."

She trails off, the familiar pain shooting through her heart. *No*, she thinks, *I need to talk about them. Even if it is with a four year old* . She swallows in her suddenly dry throat, and she digs a turret in the wall.

"... my mom and dad would take my sibling and I to the beach a lot, and when we got tired of swimming, we would build castles." she finishes.

Gaara looks at their mundane creation and begins to shape a truly impressive sandcastle of his own, focusing on the particles in his hands when he speaks again.

"What's a mom like?"

She thinks about it for a moment, and the ache is tinged with warmth. Ah, well, he probably won't even remember this when he's older, anyways. It's okay to speak the truth.

"Well I don't know what it's like for everyone, but my mom, she was awesome. When I was your age, she would make me breakfast every morning and carry me on her hip. She taught me how to read and cook. She played my favorite games with me. At night, she read me stories and taught me about all the myths from around the world," she says, letting some of the dryer sand run through her hands.

"Moms sound nice," he comments, and she can see something strange in his eyes as he looks down. What she doesn't know is that he is thinking about the way she carries him on her hip, and the way she plays games with him. Sometimes she feeds him lunch too, and just three days ago she told him the story of a shinobi boy named Ali Baba and the forty thieves he tricked.

"Moms are... they are something special. They teach you how to be a person, and stand by your side when you're all alone. They show you how powerful love can be. At least, that's what mine did."

She closes her eyes, and she remembers a plump woman with short black hair and the same snaggle-toothed smile she sees in the mirror each morning. It is a bittersweet image.

When she opens them again, a pair of light, pupiless eyes are looking at her in a particular way, open and yearning. Pale skin, unmarked by the heavy sun and untouched by the elements, is mimicked perfectly by an ultimate defense that acts like a shell. Keeping him safe, but alone.

"I think you'd be a good mom," he tells her earnestly.

She snorts, and a flash of confusion crosses his features. "Naw, I'd suck. Sometimes, I forget to feed myself or even what day it is. Can you imagine? My kids would curse like sailors and probably act just like me and my brothers did. Little monsters, the whole lot of them."

He looks down. Oh, he thinks, she doesn't like monsters. *Moms* don't like monsters. Gaara clenches his palms into fists, and something inside his chest feels funny again, but not in the good way. This is bad, he thinks. This is...

He thinks that this might be what pain feels like.

"But," he hears, and when he looks up, Aneue is looking at far away. The line where the sky meets sand, and it looks like she can see something there. What she sees makes her smile, and it's not her silly ones like when they play or when she makes a joke. Not the ones she uses when selling candy or talking to other people. This one is special, he thinks. This one is happy and warm, like the wind.

"But... even if they were monsters or demons, I would love them," she says, turning back to face him. "That's a mom's job, Gaara. To love her children, and make sure they're happy and healthy. To provide and support and guide them from the moment they are born, no matter what."

His chest doesn't feel bad anymore, and his stomach does a little wiggle when he looks at her. He doesn't say it out loud this time, but he still thinks she would be a good mom.

Then, she catches sight of the castle he has been working on. Her eyes widen, and she makes a funny face. She wonders how she could have missed the split second this piece of art was born in, because good *god* this thing is awesome.

"Holy shit, Gaara, did you just fucking make this?" she asks, and the ambience of the moment slips away, unnoticed by them both. Another heartwarming scene slaughtered by her big mouth.

"Bad words."

"Yes, I know. Bad fucking words. How long did this take?", this time cursing just to be obstinate.

The redheaded child looks up at the fort-sized building that has to be at least six times his height. It's the size of the playground jungle gym and intricately done, a definite improvement on her bastardized western monstrosity.

"I don't know," he answers, looking back at it.

"It's fucking amazing," she states, running her hands over the perfectly flat and smooth walls, "You think it's safe enough to play inside?"

He squints his eyes and looks at it for a moment, really considering the thought. It takes him a few seconds, but he nods.

"Awesome. I call being the guard!"

They waste the rest of that afternoon protecting the castle from imaginary enemy shinobi who want to breach the walls of their fort. Ryuishi takes a blow from a fake sword, but manages to warn the kingdom of an incoming army, and the magnificent and taciturn

Gaara saves her life and defeats them all with the awesome power of weaponized rubber balls.

The next day, the duo find themselves on the swings again. The little boy seems to enjoy the wind ruffling his hair as he arcs even higher.

Hot damn, she really needs to get a camera. If everybody in this world was as adorable as Gaara on a swing set, nothing much would be better, but sweet merciful Buddha would she be happier in general.

The creaking of the chains against the metal pole fills the play yard with a sound one might find in a horror movie, but it is oddly calming all the same. The children usually here vacated pretty soon after the little boy showed up, but not before mugging her for gifts of candy and sweets. She really is a sucker for kids.

Ha... sucker, she thinks. Then she mentally facepalms at her own bad pun.

The wind sweeps through, and she sings quietly, unashamed of her husky voice. It's a bad habit she picked up recuperating in Orochimaru's base, something she used to do to fill up the oppressive silence caused by constant isolation. Mostly she sang half remembered punk ballads, or shittily tried to beatbox some techno songs. Even old rock songs found themselves sung side by side with top-of-the-charts pop music and heavy metal choruses. It was kind of hard to sing the classical or instrumental things, and most of it didn't translate all that well, but it helped to keep her mind off the hallucinations that were running rampant at the time. Besides, Gaara doesn't seem to mind.

" Fergalicious, So delicious

My body stayin vicious

I be up in the gym just workin on my fitness

He's my witness, Oh WEE-"

She breathes out, humming the beat.

"Aneue?" the small human interrupts.

"Yeah?"

"Do you have to leave soon?"

She pauses for a second, observing the keen insight from the little boy who seems to be more astute than she knew. It's true that she can't stay here forever, but for him to be the one that brought it up... well, it's just unexpected.

"Yes, I have to leave soon," she answers honestly, trying it out for once. He visibly wilts at the news, turning in the swing to give her the most downtrodden eyes she has ever seen on anyone, ever. Shit, she should have stuck with lying. Dear god, why did Gaara need sand to protect him anyway? Who cares if he is a weapon of mass destruction? That injured baby animal look is fucking lethal weapon that she has no defense against.

Once more, she curses Zabuza and Kisame for being so uncute. If they had been, she might be better prepared to protect against this assault.

"Aneue shouldn't leave. Aneue should stay here with me forever," he tells her a little bit frantically, and the sand moves in agitated ways, swirling around their feet.

"Ugh, kid, don't. Stop it with that look," she begs.

"If Aneue goes, no one will play with me anymore."

"Oh child, please, those eyes are too cute-"

He continues pressing his advantage, big bright eyes boring into her. For a woman grown who has seen war and killed countless people,

she is surprisingly susceptible to this sort of thing.

"Gaara, I can't stay here forever. My merchant visa runs out in a week," she begins, casting her eyes to the side. Maybe if she can't see him it will be less effective.

The silence is astounding. It weighs down heavy on her shoulders, adding to the oppressive presence of hot desert sun and merciless wind. She can feel the sweat on her brow slide down her cheek, a reaction to both the heat and the nervousness she feels. Something inside her hates disappointing people on principle. Well that's a lie, more like disappointing small children. The sand makes that telltale rustling, scraping noise but she knows she can turn it to mud and run if need be. The crying has her more worried. Dick buckets, this is why she should stay away from children. They make her act all weird.

A sniffing sound fill the air, and oh god, oh god oh god oh god, nononono. Shit, fuck. She can't deal with this.

She peeks at him from the corner of her eyes, and fuck, yes, he is totally crying. The sweat on her brow increases in volume, and her dark orbs look away again. His little hands covering his eyes are just too much. Good lord, he's even adorable when he cries. His cute levels are stupid high, and she wants simultaneously coo and him and squeeze his hands probably a little too hard. The violence and affection inside her all fucked up.

What if... what if she just walks away right now? If she just lets this happen, it will run its course. He'll get tired soon enough, right?

Mentally, she scolds herself. *Way to be a huge dick.*

Okay, um, what would her mother have done? Probably just stare at her until she noticed how much of a fool she looked like, but he can't see her with his tiny little hands over his eyes. That's another option down the drain. Her little sister only cried when she hit her too hard or fucked something up, and usually she made soft promises to

make sure her parents didn't find out. He wasn't in physical pain either.

Wing it, she thinks, *like you do literally everything else*.

Before she can think too hard about it, she follows that train of thought and turns back around to kneel at his side, her arms outstretched to wrap around him slowly. If she goes too fast then it's more sand in the face, and that shit hurts.

"Gaara," she says, rubbing circles on his back, "Staaahp."

The child continues crying in her arms, hiding his face away and dripping a suspiciously viscous liquid from one of his face holes. She's betting it's his nose, and that kinda disgusts her.

"Gaara, seriously, what am I supposed to do?" she asks.

He grumbles out something but it is too muffled by whatever liquid is coming from him to understand. Where is he getting all the hydration for this, anyway? She knows they give out water rations here, but there is no way they take into account how tearful a four year old can get. Or do they? Is that something you can even calculate?

"We have one week left, and I'm going to come back. I just have things that need to be done outside of here."

Like making emotional attachments with other jinchuuriki because not only are they cute, but it is always super useful to have a weapon of mass destruction on your side. She decides it's best to not tell him that though, because he might not understand. Actually, most people might not understand, which is weird. She wouldn't seek them out if they were giant assholes, and usually she comes to genuinely care for them, so what is wrong if they use each other sometimes?

Orochimaru got it, she thinks sullenly to herself.

She feels a growing stain on her shirt and wants to cringe, but she bucks up and deals with it, continuing to comfort the little boy.

"Come... come back?" he asks her after a few minutes, looking up at her with such an innocent, open face that it causes her shame.

"Yah, of course I'm coming back," she assures him, trying to put a warm smile on her face. "I still have to teach you how to catch lizards, and show you the wonders of spitting seeds."

His teary face looks confused at the idea of spitting. She can hear his thought process stuttering to a halt. *But Uncle Yashamaru says spitting is rude*, or some shit like that. Well, Uncle fucking Yashamaru can suck a fat one, because spitting properly is an essential part of growing up. How else is one going to express both disgust and derision at once?

"I still have so many stories to tell you too. I mean, you have no idea who Harry Potter is, do you? How about Brendan and Aisling, and the Secret of Kells?"

He shakes his head no and she sighs, brushing crimson hair away from his forehead tenderly. She can't see how gritty his shield is, even this close up it looks like skin, but the gesture must mean something nonetheless, because he leans into her touch.

"As long as I am able to, I will continue to visit. I know waiting will be hard, and you might get lonely, but I'm not going to leave forever. Not by choice," she soothes.

He seems to accept this in his own quiet way, but he doesn't look any happier when he leans into her embrace, still sniffing slightly. She sighs and accepts her place as his snot rag and cushion for the moment, glad that she can hold weird positions for so long. If not, her knees would be screaming at her by now.

She hates to make kids cry, but this time she has to. He is not the only lonely child in need of affection in this world, and she has plans.

Plans so that no child has to end up like this, afraid of a stranger's departure, reliant on other people's kindness and afraid of who they are. They won't wake up from dreams of teammates from their past and heart wrenching failures.

No, not when she's done.

AN: SO! Ryuishi likes fergie (Who I also don't have any ties to) and reveals her big plan for the time! Befriending weapons of mass destruction when possible! YAY! SHe also probably wants them because they are huge dots with 'main plot' written all over them. Also a sneak peek into what Kisame and Zabuza are doing, hint, they are probably still in Kiri doing this stuff.

I LOVE REVIEWERS. I ALSO LOVE FAVORITERS, FOLLOWERS, AND LURKERS.

I also very much appreciate my beta, enbi, who helps me out so much.

Now, for a different twist on the Authors notes... What would you guys like to see Ryuishi doing? I'm making no promises, and they have to be sorta reasonable, but I am open for input. Just fuck me up man, send your thoughts in and they might make it in the fic. Maybe, no promises, again.

Meeting Sunshine

I do not own Naruto

For all the shit she said about shitty village security, Ryuishi should say there is some differences between them all. Suna has the most thorough paper checks, and Kumo is the worst about searching supplies and bags. Iwa is really bad about checking bodies themselves and has a bit of an overzealous view on immigrants in general, while Kiri is a stickler for current registration dates and time limit boundaries.

Konoha, though... Konoha has to be the worst for diseases and smuggling. With their doujutsu users as second security and gate guards, it's almost fucking impossible to pass through if you're there as a drug mule or shinobi in disguise trying to make it look legal. Sharingan can memorize every body reaction and tell before it happens, and even with her skill level she isn't sure she would make it through. She doesn't even want to know what a Hyuuga would see if they tried to look at her messed up, Void-infected chakra system.

So, she doesn't try to get through the legal way. There is a reason that Kisame and Itachi will be able to get inside the heart of Konoha so easily in the future and it has little to do with their power level. It has way more to do with the infrastructure of the city itself.

Konoha wasn't built to house ragtag groups of bandits and mercenaries like Kirigakure or Iwa. It isn't the remnants of traders and nomads like Suna, or the once capital of a lost age like Kumo. Instead it was built as a place for noble clans to exist peacefully, and that meant a lot of space and open land between them. In fact, it is the only village built with training fields inside of its walls.

What Ryuishi could have done was attempt to pass her way through, but with her much younger face still in the bingo books and her

altogether attitude, she isn't sure they wouldn't detain her for further questioning. She could have tried some of the underground tunnels that litter the place, but they're dirty and lead into the sewers before open air, not to mention she's pretty sure ROOT bases are planted in them somewhere. If she had a list of what kind of things she least liked to deal with, human feces and shady brainwashing organizations would probably be near the top, right underneath 'people who are too much like her' and 'no running water'.

So she takes the rivers and lakes that snake through the walls and forests. She was trained in Kiri, after all.

She sets the familiar, if a bit beaten up, set of Gills in her mouth, and slips into the chilly, spring-fed waters like she never left them in the first place. The light filtering through the surface never fails to bring her joy, and even with her pack weighing on her back, she feels better than she could have imagined before. In Kiri it was tinged with stress and darker thoughts, but now, swimming is what she remembers it being. It is sheer weightlessness, freeing and peaceful. She is part of the water, and it is part of her. The waving of her hair, the tranquility of muffled sound and hearing. Her soul is nourished here under the water, balanced out and cheerful. There is no Void, no worries, no mission or war, she is doing what she wants and finding happiness again.

Bushy, leaf-laden trees turn into green blurs, and sunshine warps and smudges from below. She can see the stones of the river bottom, the suckerfish feeding off the algae and scum. No saltwater stings her eyes, and no giant predators are here with her to keep her wary. Except for turtles, they might be able to do some damage. Like, bite off a toe or something. Ryuishi thinks she could stay here for hours thinking about that nonsense, or maybe forever, but she has work to do.

So, like a particularly woman-shaped salmon, she heads upstream in the shadows of the water, using lilies and shade spots for cover. There is a point where she has to dive pretty low and slip through some metal bars, but really, what if her pack was full of several kilos

of saran wrapped opium or sandwich bagged shrooms? This would be much too easy. Briefly, she wonders why everything seems to relate back to smuggling drugs, then decides that as healthy as she is getting, that some parts of her is are a little too messed up to figure out.

She eventually makes it to some sort of farmland, and scouts the area around quickly. A large, open field, copses of trees off to the left, and a sun shining high above. Not perfect, but she can deal with it. She looks around, attempting to spot any sort of hidden guard. It isn't very good because her eyesight sucks and everything looks like indistinguishable blobs at a distance, but hopefully one of those shapeless blobs isn't an ninja. Whatever. When she shimmies out of the water, nothing tries to kill her, so she thinks she's good and makes her way to the trees to dry off and fix herself. Thank god for waterproof eyeliner and lip stain though, her mirror is at the very bottom of her bag and she doesn't feel like fixing any runs.

Now she just has to relax for a little before moving on. Maybe even take a nap, yeah, a nap sounds good.

Regret like the weight of a thousand suns bears down on her, as her heart beats heavy in her throat. She should have never come here, should have just left the children of the Leaf to be picked off by madmen. There is nothing that could make her want to deal with this, nothing at all.

She weeps fat tears as yet another Kikaichu beetle falls off of her in the water.

The Aburame clan is sick, she decides, it's sick and needs help that no one can give. She is never using that area to infiltrate again, she swears it. How can she appease these disgusting and vengeful demons? How can she make them see it was a simple mistake that led her to their clan grounds?

Ryuishi doesn't have the answers to that, she doesn't have answers at all. All she knows is that she woke up covered in bugs, a stranger standing off to her left. While she's glad they didn't kill her in her sleep, she also wishes that THEY DIDN'T COVER HER IN BEETLES.

Those awful creatures with their hard shells and too strong legs that skitter over skin. Any other bug she can deal with just fine. Worms, Caterpillars, slugs, snails? No fucking problem. Butterflies, moths, mosquitoes, flies? Perfectly acceptable. Spiders scorpions, dragon flies, praying mantises? Actually kinda cool. Beetles? You better get the fuck away from her with that shit.

Ryuishi would rather take fleas or ticks over a beetle on her. She hates them with a passion carried over from a past life, hates them more than she ever hated Kirigakure or the shinobi system. More than that, she fears them. On some primal level, every single part of her psyche screams in disgust and rejection at them on her. She can deal with them from a distance, and she knows that there are ecosystems that rely on them, but on her fucking person? No, nonono, just *no* .

The fact that she witnessed them crawling out of a person's skin will haunt her for ages. That nightmare fuel is going to remain with her forever. So she had taken off, leaping towards the river faster than they could have followed. She probably shrieked about it a little too, no shame in admitting that now. There's probably a low level alert out for her, and she'll have to be a thousand times sneakier, but at least she has her scratched out hitai-ate tucked away in her bag. She can't imagine how bad it would have been if they thought her a missing nin rather than a thug or whatever.

Swimming knocked most of them off, but she doesn't have room to fuck around anymore, not after this screw up. Also, the idea of them hiding in her things is terrifying to her, so she does what any right minded Water Country kunoichi would do and remains hidden in the main river of the city for hours, concealing her chakra and waiting for anything living to just fall off and **die**. Sure, it presses her Gills to their limits, and she'll have to blow some cash to get new conversion

filters for them, but at this point she would pay as much money as possible to know that there was no Kikaichu on her. Or in her bag, or hair, or... oh God.

She waits for the little skin breathers-and isn't that fucking awful? beetles breathe through their skin, god damned abominations-to drown, taking her time and adding her tears to the river, making it a tiny bit saltier. The current will make sure that even if they laid a queen on her, the pheromone ridden corpse will end up miles down stream along with the rest of their tiny, hard shelled, forsaken carcasses. It also gives her the advantages of only leaving one scent spot. She didn't want to be noticed, but here she is. She'll have to improvise, adapt, and overcome.

Which, in this case, means crawling out of the river and into an alleyway in the cover of darkness, and finding her bed for the night in an empty dumpster. Ryuishi hates filth, and the thought of cockroaches terrifies her more than being discovered by enemy shinobi, so she may or may not use a suiton jutsu to spruce the place up, chakra flare be damned.

Her wrinkly, pruney fingers flash through the boar, dog, and ram signs, and she silently performs the Suito: Hahonryu technique on the empty dumpster before she settles inside of it for a night.

Finally, she thinks sourly, I'm where I belong. In the trash. Queen of the garbage, that's me.

Tomorrow, she will visit the local akasen, and from there she can blend in with the whores and send feelers out for the young blond child. One or two of the Mumei, her nameless children, have made it this far, that much she knows. They would probably be more than happy to let her clean up with them. She falls into a light sleep with that thought in mind.

Only, that isn't at all how it goes.

She never counts on the low level alarm to startle a trouble making prankster in the morning, or for him to be avoiding squads of shinobi because he pranked the old man who called him 'demon' again, and Jiji always sent them out to bring him back. Ryuishi doesn't ever think that of all the alleyways and backstreets of Konoha, he will be strangely attracted to one with a suspiciously clean, if drippy, dumpster inside of it. So when she wakes up to the sound of footsteps outside her-and yes, over the course of the night it became hers, she owns it now, fuck off-she maybe sort of panics.

Bleary-eyed and groggy from a horrible night of sleep, she shoots out of that sucker like a striking snake, slamming her skull through the heavy lid of it. From there, she is too preoccupied with how much her fucking head smarts to remember that she needs to be aware and curls at the waist, clasping the top of her head and cursing to herself.

"Fucking shit on a shingle baking in the hot Suna sun!" she hisses.

She never notices the small blond boy's eyes light up at the colorful vernacular, or the appraising once over he gives her, as if confirming something to himself.

"Hey!" he practically shouts, and her head snaps up to finally notice him, dread filling her heart. Ryuishi notices sky blue eyes and hair like sunshine. Whisker-kissed cheeks and tiny, adorable little hands fisted on scruffy looking clothes that are draped over a healthy frame.

Shit, shit, she wanted to make a way better impression than this. She wanted to be a beautifully dressed savior who found him when he was vulnerable, someone who took him back and fed him and had otherworldly grace. She did not want to be standing in dirty clothes inside a dumpster, cursing like a damn sailor and clutching at a self inflicted head wound.

Well, she thinks, improvise .

"What do you want, sunshine?" she asks, and maybe it comes out a little harsher than called for, but her head is fucking pounding like a son of a bitch.

"Why are you in the dumpster?"

This... is not at all what she expected. Where was his shyness? His caution of strangers? Where was his fucking tact?

"Because that's where I belong," she answers blandly.

"Are you a garbage fairy?" he asks, and woah, Gaara was much quieter than this. What the hell is he going on about? What the fuck is a garbage fairy? Why is this four year old so good at speaking? Is this a thing that just fucking happens now?

"Yes," she answers, just because she can. Why fucking not add that to the ridiculous things people call her? Kiri no Ningyo, Burner of the Mist, Rakki Ryuu, Aneue and the garbage fairy. They all mean the same thing, really. Okay, not really, but she doesn't actually care. It's been a rough day and a half.

"Really?!" he cries out, and jeez this kid is loud, "Do I get a wish because because I found you?"

"That's a genie, sunshine. Not a fairy. "

"What do fairies do then?"

"Uh... well fuck if I know, usually I just do whatever."

He scowls at her, arms crossed on his tiny chest. He looks pretty cute, in that dirty-yet-healthy street urchin way. Not the timid shyness or calm wariness of the redheaded boy she knows, but his big blue eyes and expressive face have a certain charm. Ryuishi would totally waste a roll of film on him.

Don't be creepy for fuck's sake, stop it, she thinks to herself.

"That's lame," he tells her, and really, she would spend more time explaining how not lame she is, but she is gross, and tired, and she wants a shower.

"But I always wanted a pet, and you don't seem scared like the cats are, so you'll do," he blurts suddenly, and she is thrown by the non sequitur. What?

"You'll have to be sneaky though, Jiji says I'm not re... respo... He says I can't have a pet," he tells her, giving her a measuring look.

"If you let me shower and crash at your place, then I don't particularly care," because fuck, she wants this to be the best impression she has ever made. A shady garbage fairy lady who wants to use your shower and has been sleeping in a dumpster. That doesn't scream drug dealer or hooker at all. Who the hell has been raising this child, and how is he still alive?

"You're not going to do anything funny, right?" he asks.

"What the fuck kind of funny stuff am I going to do? Pee on your floor?"

"Fairies pee?"

"You know what, just show me how to get there."

He nods and chatters all the way, but somehow manages to make it sneaky. The kid has an uncanny skill at sneaking about that seems almost instinctual, and she wonders if it is a trained habit or just a character trait. Whatever it is, he's good at it, and they eventually make their way to an apartment building that looks like it has seen better days, but isn't in the worst of conditions. It reminds her of the flat she and her friend owned for a while. The inside is filthy, which isn't surprising considering someone has left a four year old live by themselves, but she still cringes at the mess. She doesn't mind untidiness but this... well, it's some next level wreckage.

She will fix this... later.

"Shower is that way," he tells her, pointing to a room barricaded by dirty clothes and what she can only assume is old food and rope? Ninja wire? She doesn't even know, but she heads that way quickly, stepping over things and diving into the shower. She won't know peace until she is clean and sure bugs aren't hiding in her things.

Ryuishi proceeds to empty the entire contents of her rucksack onto the floor and check every hidden pocket and folded piece of fabric for Kikaichu, then carefully picks out her products and washes the ever-living shit out of herself. Scrubbing, shaving, exfoliating, cleansing, conditioning, she does them all until the dirty bathroom reeks of several different and heady scents. The steam is so thick that it reminds her of morning in Kiri, only way better smelling. When she deems herself acceptable and finally comes to terms with how far this situation is than from where she wanted it to be, she puts on a set of clean clothes from a plastic bag, shoves her old ones in, and gets dressed. She towel dries her hair, not even bothering to throw it back up properly, and wraps it up, instead applying her eyeliner and leaving it at that.

Ryuishi knows that she should be worried, scared of being found out. Terrified of being caught and thrown into the T&I department and never seeing the sun again, never feeling the wind on her face. She should be wholly and completely freaking out over the fact that ANBU or Uchiha police could pop in at any point in time. Her plans are down the drain and it's up shit creek without a paddle, but that would take so much energy, so much effort to care about. So she doesn't. Instead, she packs up her things neatly into her oversized bag, seals them away, and steps out of the bathroom like she is totally comfortable in this mess. She pretends this is an entirely normal situation, and moves some stuff off the couch and plops down.

I reject your reality, she sing-songs inside her mind, and submit my own .

"What's on your head?" a voice asks from inches away, and when she turns, the child has apparently been sitting there the whole time.

"A towel to keep my hair out of my way until I can treat it," she tells him. "What's your name?"

"Uzumaki Naruto, dattebayo!" he proclaims, beaming at her. The expression is so purely fucking happy that it sparks something inside of her. It is the same feeling she gets when she swims, or when her unit would grin at her over meals, the same thing she felt when Gaara showed her those wide, hopeful eyes.

Little kids, she thinks to herself without malice, smiling softly back, *they are my biggest fucking weakness*.

Then she rethinks that and mentally adds beetles to that. Small children and beetles are her weaknesses.

"Do garbage fairies have names?" he asks her, shuffling in place.

"Eh, sometimes. You can call me whatever you like."

"Oh, I know! Dumpster, because I found you in a dumpster!"

"I lied, do not call me that."

"But you said-!"

"Straight up lied, just said that. Try again," she tells him.

"How can you even lie up?!" He scowls and fold his arms, and it looks so fucking cute she can barely stand it. She gestures for him to continue with a wave of her hand.

"Smelly, because you smell good," he starts.

"Too much room for bad representation, next."

"Towel head?"

"I think that may be a racial slur, but I'm not sure if it's applicable in this world," she says, gripping said object on her skull and beginning to unwind it. There's oils she needs to put in it to keep it looking nice and not falling out from all the activities she does. It wouldn't do to leave a trail of long black threads all over the countryside.

"Cat, because you're picky like one."

She laughs at the irony of that statement, although she tries to ignore how much it hurts. Naruto seems startled by it, and though he doesn't say anything, she thinks he might know because he tries to change the subject. Children have that uncanny ability to pick up things like that.

"Well, what should I call you then?" he asks, and she pauses to think about it.

"How about nee-san?"

He is suddenly silent, and turning to look at him, she is stunned by the change of emotions on his face. His eyes are huge and his mouth is open. He looks like she just told him the secret of the universe, and maybe a bit teary too. At first she doesn't understand, because she had Gaara calling her the same thing, only more formal.

If there was anything she was good at in her past life, anything she was proud of, it was that she was a good older sister. She loved (loves) her siblings, even when things turned sour with her brothers, and she would (will) do anything for her little sister. Ryuishi wants that again, to be that kind of person again, she's been searching her whole second life for it. Even with the nameless she tried, and especially with Zabuza and Kisame. Only, she never quite got there. She became an idol to the Mumei, a best friend to her boys. She was something to be protected and cherished, not the one who protected and watched over them.

Naruto though, she realizes, Naruto isn't like the others. Gaara has an older sister. A distant one, but she is there. He knows where he came from and has people to guide him, if only down the wrong path. The nameless didn't need siblings, they needed a figurehead, a person to put their hopes behind, and Kisame and Zabuza only ever wanted friends. Naruto, he has none of those. Someone willing to give him a chance, to openly acknowledge him and claim him must be overwhelming.

She realizes again how powerful words can be.

"Really?" he asks, and the way he says it in such a small, unsure voice is heartbreaking.

"Way better than dumpster," she assures him, reaching out a hand to ruffle his hair. It is soft like a chick's down, and she is way glad she did because he lights up like a firework in the night sky. If she thought his first smile was dazzling, this one is a thousand times brighter. It stretches all the way across his cheeks, and he looks at her with such hope, such innocent joy, she melts inside.

This is why he is special, she thinks to herself. I have killed a hundred men and slaughtered a hundred women. I have led children to war and betrayed those closest to me. I have slept in a den made by a snake and traded lives like money, but his smile makes me want to believe again.

She thinks of her sister and her own million watt grin, and though she knows Naruto is not her sister, she feels like maybe having a little brother wouldn't be so bad. Her sister would understand.

She rearranges plans inside her head, shifts plots and scheme around to fit this new variable in.

Number one unpredictable ninja is right, and he hasn't even begun the academy yet.

"Now, you wanna help me with my hair?" she asks, and he leaps off the couch in eagerness.

"Yeah! What do I do?" he asks.

She unwinds the towel and lets her long black hair flop down, still smelling like lilies. It drapes all the way down past her waist and he lets out a 'woah' at the sight of it.

"Go wash your hands. I'll get some oil, and you have to help me rub it in all of this fucking mess."

"Gross!" he exclaims with glee.

"Not as gross as your apartment. Tomorrow I'm gonna clean this place up."

"That sounds boring!" he declares from his way to the bathroom.

Somehow, she doesn't think it is possible for life to be boring with Naruto around.

An:I am a bit late, but here it is! Bluhbluhbluh, I was going to post last night, but I got tired. If you're wondering why the aburame didn't kill her on sight remember that they probably wanted to take her into T&I and she has changed a bit since eleven.

THANK YOU TO ALL MY READERS! GET CRUNK TO ALL MY FOLLOWERS, FAVORITERS, AND REVIEWERS!

A soft bed of angel kisses for my beta, enbi.

Since you all really got into the last question, here's another: Who would you like to see humiliated? Remember that these questions are for fun, and send in your answers!

Meeting Soft Serenity

I do not own Naruto

Rain pours steadily down from the heavens in fat, slow drops. The liquid pitter patters down from the atmosphere and sets off a chorus of drips from leaves and stone and sky. Thunder rolls across the clouds, lazily and heavy in the dark depths of the night. Its rumbling reverberates through the world below, lethargic waves of sound resonating inside her body and soul, accented by blinding flashes of purple-white light. The heavy winds shake the leaf-filled trees, and the rustling noise it makes sounds like a small wave crashing on wet sand. It stinks of wet earth and ozone, and something Ryuishi can't name, but the pieces of her all quiet and stand in appreciation of the discordant tranquility of the weather. She always did love a good storm.

She tries to enjoy it and not think about how the rumbling of thunder makes her thigh and calf muscles tense, as if preparing to dodge out of the way of an incoming Doton technique; she tries to ignore how the crackle of lightning and the stench of ozone makes her body vibrate with a tangible need to utterly eradicate a threat from the face of the planet.

On the battlefield is different from the off. Remind yourself of what is different, not the same, she hears Orochimaru tell her in her head. For a man with such dangerous degrees of sociopathy, he certainly knew how to compartmentalize.

So she thinks of how it is different, how she is hiding instead of attacking. She focuses on the lack of death in the air, the absence of agonized screams and roaring balls of fire. She breathes deep and focuses on how she can't hear the shriek of projectiles cutting through the air, how she cannot smell blood, piss, and shit. The patio is stable beneath her feet, not rolling and heaving like an injured

animal, and she doesn't hear the sounds of clashing metal and enraged insults, except for inside her head.

She thinks of fonder memories, of time spent in the water with her boys, of Zabuzza standing atop the lake's surface as he tried to snatch Kisame and her out of it like the fish they were. She thinks of warm beds and ambient lighting and two hands, one for each of hers. The contrast of pale white and grey blue against warm bronze. She feels the weight of metal in her ears and remembers the way a man who she used to think of as an alternate version of Josef Mengele tenderly pierced her ears, three on the left, one on the right, just like in her old world. How his soft breathing soothed her when she was out of her mind and how the rasp of his voice, like the sliding of pages against each other, reminded her what reality was.

The rain soaks through her clothes, tepid in contrast to the warmer weather, and each patter of moisture against her skin is a little like an embrace. She let her hair down a while ago and she can feel the heavy, waterlogged weight of it pulling her head back and sticking to every part of her, right down to the curve of her backside where it ends.

She does love being wet, she thinks, then smirks at her own double entendre.

Naruto stares at her from the safety of the warm, dry inside of the house and he looks like he thinks she's crazy, but she grins while he rolls his eyes.

"What?" she asks, "I can't enjoy the weather a bit?"

"It's just a thunderstorm," he tells her in his adorable, childish, matter-of-fact way.

She scoffs and rolls her eyes, tilting her arms up the the sky as if in praise and letting the rain absolutely drench her. If she had known thunderstorms in Fire Country got like this, she might have considered their coastlines a bit more. Actually that's a lie, Fire

Country is the center of some absolutely crazy shit and she would prefer not to deal with it.

"For a brat called Maelstrom, you are entirely unappreciative of some chaotic weather."

"You're weird," is her answer.

She snorts and focuses on the weather a bit more, attempting to reclaim another thing this life has stolen from her. She is going to find peace here, she tells herself, she is going to come to terms with the way things are now. Sure, sometimes she might have to kill people, and she might be particularly good at sabotage and manipulation. Okay, she still partakes in the occasional battle, but it is on her terms now. No mission orders, no absent Mizukage, no endless need to pretend. She is growing up, and her body looks more and more like her own every day; her life reflects that.

Now she can take some one on one time with lonely, neglected children because she wants to. She can invade villages because she wants to, she can see the Mumei if she wants to. The choice is back in her hands.

It is worth the guilt and loneliness, she thinks, worth the blood I have paid, and the scars I wear with pride. I made it eleven years in hell, I survived a war and crumbled with the village of Kiri. I have known heartbreak and confusion, apathy and regret. Madness was my companion and remains a threat, but for now I am in control and I choose what I want.

Granted, what she usually wants can range from an entire bottle of sake to a binge meal of sweets, but she never said she was responsible.

Eventually she turns to head back in, but is met with a squawk of indignation from a little blond haired boy who is staring at the puddle her hair is dripping onto the floor.

"It just got clean!" he cries, and she gives him an un-amused look.

"Like you had anything to do with that. I distinctly remember spending a good fucking portion of the morning and afternoon making sure it was that way," she drawls.

"Hey! I washed dishes AND helped with floors!" he retaliates and she rolls her eyes, squeezing water from her hair out the window.

"Don't forget, you put the detergent in the machine too," she replies sarcastically, molding her chakra in her hands and collecting the water out of her clothes and hair. She's still damp, but it's better now.

"YEAH!"

She rolls with it, because in the scope of things, there is nothing to lose by letting him have this. There isn't much for her to lose anyways, because she owns nothing but the pack on her back and a house somewhere in Wind Country with wood panel walls and a raised deck. Socially speaking she has some ties (an understatement if there ever was one) with the Mumei and the infamous missing-nin Orochimaru. From there she has nothing, nothing but two little boys she uses to keep herself sane and diverted.

Looking down at him, she wonders if she ever can fully put into words how cute Naruto is. Even though she found nothing but flavored ramen cups and packaged meals inside his cupboards, he is as hale and healthy as a child with a well balanced diet. His skin clean now that he's had a bath and his clothes close to being mended. Bright blue eyes that are like clear marbles made of sea glass hold her own. Hair the color of lemons and sunshine lays in a charming, ruffled mess on his little head and his teeth couldn't look more perfect, even if the toothbrush in the bathroom looked suspiciously unused.

It must be nice, she thinks, to have a giant mass of malevolent chakra sealed inside your fucking guts making sure you're healthy.

It may seem like a callous thought, but Ryuishi is used to much worse than neglected children. She hadn't even known how bad Kiri was until she got out of it. She had acclimatized herself to ribs poking out underneath chests and sallow skin stretched over brittle bones. It was normal to have sunken eyes and cracked lips, unhealthy distended bellies and rickets in joints. Traveling around, she realizes what she should have known all along: no one in Kiri was healthy, be it mentally, emotionally, or physically.

A part of her resents the other nations for ignoring them, for blocking out their suffering cries and their need for goods. Then she remembers that revenge is being served slowly, steadily, as the Mumei spread. They are steel, forged in the fires of Kiri, warped by pressure and pain, but still strong.

"So, sunshine, what should we have for dinner?" she asks, pushing those thoughts away.

"RAMEN!" he belts out, and she is not surprised in the least. Why bother framing it in the form of a question?

"How about you bring me my bag, and we check what I brought with me."

He scurries off into the adjacent living room, still in full sight. He reaches around, and she is amused to note her pack is almost bigger than he is. He tries to pick it up, fails, and tries again. She muses that it's not that heavy.

Startled at the notion, he turns to look back at her, sweeping an arm out to the off-color canvas. "Is this a trick?"

"No, it's a bag."

He scowls and braces his weight against the floor, leaning back as he grasps a shoulder strap tightly and heaves, grunting at it. She lets him strain against the weight, twisting and squirming. After one

particular maneuver, she even heard the soft sound of a fart and had to bite her lip from howling with laughter.

Farts are natural, she thinks, *don't make him ashamed of a bodily function* . But it's still funny as hell.

"Stop, before you hurt yourself," she forces out, and she's sure her face must be red from the effort it is taking not to giggle like a child.

"I can do it!" he tells her, still writhing like an angry dog with a chew toy.

She walks over, ribs trembling from the exchange, and pick up the bag one handed, carrying it over to the counter for easier access. Naruto stares at her with wide eyes.

"Nee-san is strong," he whispers.

"Took me a long time." she answers honestly, because it had. She muscled up easy, but no matter how easy it was for her, she didn't grow at the same rate as an adolescent boy. Keeping up with Kisame and Zabuza had left her constantly tired, and she isn't sure if she'll ever get to their skill level. Swinging around big-ass fucking swords is hard work and requires an upper body like a tank. Ryuishi might be able to punch down a few trees and leave a crater in the earth, but her boys (still her boys, always her boys) can break a bridge and shatter cliffs.

Muscle bound testosterone nonsense is what that is, she'd like to see them do it with half as much flair as her. Or take their foot and touch it to their head still standing.

She idly opens the rucksack, flipping through the main pocket. Inside is more than one would think could fit, and she sends a quiet thanks to her snake-faced caretaker for the seals he painted within. They probably also track her or can be remotely detonated to explode or some shit, but now she can carry tons more stuff.

She pulls out her clean clothes, washed alongside Naruto's, and her weapons scroll. Then her maintenance kit, survival water scroll, survival rations scroll, a wad of cash that definitely did not come from extorting some douchebags, candy, papers, a full thing of ninja gear, a bag of cosmetics, a hygiene bag, a box of tampons, and her 'spa kit' which held various perfumes and oils and treatments. Naruto grabs at this one, which he recognizes from the night before, and she lets him even though most of those little bottles cost more than his apartment might cost each month.

"Careful," she warns.

On a side note, it pays to be so tightly connected with sex workers. Not only does she have an assortment of bukijutsu, taijutsu, ninjutsu, and genjutsu to use, but Kagami and her girls helped remind her that her body is a weapon in different ways as well. Sex is a natural thing, and though she could really care less about what she looks like to other people, it can be a weapon too. There is a strength in the dip of her waist and the curve of her wide hips, and if someone wants to be stupid enough to stare at the sweat slicked expanse of her stomach while they are fighting, then you can bet your ass she's going to use that. Thus, crop tops. Also, they let her girls get a underboob breeze that she didn't know she needed.

Eventually they reach the box she's looking for, accompanied by a small scroll. The child abandons the bottles he was sniffing curiously and hovers by her side, looking at the accumulation of junk.

"That's a lot of stuff." he tells her, wriggling his hand through the pile. Ryuishi is suddenly glad most of the blades are sealed up and that her meteor hammer is wrapped around her underneath her pants.

"Sure is. Now, dinner?" she asks.

"What's that?" he asks, jutting his free hand toward the case and scroll she is carrying, ignoring her previous words. She resists the urge to roll her eyes again.

"Spice box and some staple ingredients stored away," she tells him. It was a habit she picked up with her old unit, because meat strictly cooked over an open flame or eaten raw was bland and boring.

"What is an in-gred-ient?"

"A component used in a dish. Like water is an ingredient of ramen, get it?" she asks.

"What is a comp-onent?"

"It means it's part of something else."

He nods, tucking his hand under his chin. Every time she answers his many, many questions, he seems to act like she showed him the whole world. Seriously, his epiphany moments are way too cute.

"Now, I have vegetables, eggs and fish in this one. I think you have some rice, maybe, and there was some miso paste still in the fridge," she lists, going over it in her mind.

"Vegetables are gross!" he exclaims. She unseals them before looking over at the boy with narrowed eyes.

"Sunshine, I made a demon eat his vegetables, don't think I can't make you," she tells him seriously, hair down and hands braced on the counters.

He looks shocked and uneasy. "You knew a demon?" he asks.

"Sure, he was my best friend growing up," she tells him easily, washing the vegetables. Just for his sass, she's going to make a whole bunch of them. "Hated vegetables, and talking, but we got along pretty well. Knew a monster too. He was much easier to talk with."

"What were their names?" Naruto asks excitedly.

Then she realizes belatedly this is dangerous territory. Naruto can't know what their names are because he's too young to keep a secret. If he tells everybody he has a garbage fairy nee-san, well, maybe they'll keep a better fucking eye on him. If he blurts out two of the Kaijuu no Kiri's names, it isn't going to be hard to figure out what the third is doing. She pauses in her knife chops. Fuck, what was Hanako calling them again? Shit was all kid friendly and fairy tale like, but it always made her out to be some sort of princess buddha or something, so she chose to ignore it most of the time. Come on, come on-

"Odayaka Oni and Chujitsuna Same," she remembers out loud.

Then she wants to snort because "gentle demon"? That's a fucking load of nonsense. "Loyal shark" is something she can't argue with, though.

"What were they like?" he asks as she prepares dinner, and she smiles as she tells him.

"That's a hard question to answer because they were very different people, and I'm not sure you would get that quite yet," she tells him honestly. How do you tell an idealistic child that the boy who slaughtered a whole school and the teenager who tried to kill her were actually okay people?

"How about I tell you about the time Odayaka Oni split his pants open in the middle of a skirmish and somehow still managed to make it look like it happened on purpose?"

"Is there fighting?"

"Yes."

"YEAH, TELL ME DATTEBAYO."

She laughs and scrapes the medley off the board and into the simmering saucepan, adding some of the thinner slices to the miso

pot. He's so excitable about it, and she can remember laughing about it as well. It's good to tell these stories, she thinks, because she get to remember the fun she had with her unit, the good points in the war. She gets to recall brighter times and remind herself about the boys she loves.

"Okay, well, A few years before you were born, on the border of Water Country, Odayaka Oni, Chujitsuna Same, and I were preparing for an ambush. It was war, and we were all pretty scared-"

Ryuishi spends most of dinner spinning out the story, trying to impart just how silly those three kids were, how happy there were to be together, even in the horror of war. Yes, she tells him about war, she tries not to glorify it and sometimes he looks a little wary of it, but she won't paint him a better picture. She refuses. War is terrible, it is larger than she can ever hope to imagine, a force beyond comprehension. Her father was right about that. She saw acts of utter depravity and boundless mercy on the same fields.

Sometimes war is called for, she thinks, but not this one. She is still recovering, and some elemental nations are still at it right now.

By the time dinner is cooked she thinks that Naruto might have some unsettling heroes, and she laughs, because it is beyond funny to her that her old teammates are so relatable to him.

"Why is he a demon, though?" he asks, picking at the fish on his plate.

She smiles to herself, because she wonders why they hate what they created, why her unit was stigmatized for being the best with no other choice.

"We're all just people, sunshine," she says, "Some might be meaner, scarier, ruder, more violent, and more powerful. Some might be kind and sweet and gentle. People come in a thousand varieties and each one is special, but that can be hard to tell. Like snowflakes we are unique, but you never really notice and in the end it almost

doesn't matter when they're piled high on each other, covering everything."

He looks confused and she takes a sip of her miso, playing with the floating strip of wakame inside the broth. There was no tofu, but it isn't horrible without it. She wants to maybe add that big differences are hard to point out in corpses piled on top of each other, just like snow, but it's a bit dark of humor for a four year old.

"We're all just people. You, me, Odayaka Oni, Chujitsuna Same, just people, for better or worse," she says.

"But you're a garbage fairy."

She sighs and guesses it was a little high concept for someone who essentially just quit shitting his pants, but whatever. She honestly has stopped giving a damn at this point, so she rudely jabs at him with her chopsticks.

"You just volunteered to do dishes."

"NO I DIDN'T!"

"I'm sorry, what is it your supposed to call me?"

"I'm gonna call you mean butt, dattebayo!"

"Step up your game and try again sunshine, I've known infants that can insult better than you."

He stews on this with a mouthful of rice, the fish and vegetables already gone. The juice looks about finished too, and really it's like six dishes, she already washed the pots and pans. He chews furiously because he knows after the breakfast incident that she will in fact swat his ass if he spits food in her face like a disgusting heathen child. Swallowing, he looks nervous, but strangely anticipatory.

"You're a no good, dirty, rotten little monster," he spits, and wow, she is entirely too certain that he has heard that come from someone else. Ryuishi lets it roll right off of her, showing him that those words mean nothing to her.

They should mean nothing to you, goes unsaid.

"You are a turd-burgling buttmuncher," she slings back, because yes, four years old is an entirely appropriate age to begin mudslinging. She can't wait to hear how the Hokage reacts to this.

He looks like it takes a moment for him to understand what is happening, then to process the insult. His face is scrunched up, but slowly it dawns on him that this too is a game to be played, just like the pirates they played while cleaning the bathroom.

"Nee-san drinks pee and farts like a cow!"

She laughs, because that first part is patently untrue but that last one might be a little too close to the truth. Naruto smiles with pride, and yes, she thinks, keep smiling like that. Don't let anyone ever take it away from you.

Later, before bed, after re-packing her bag, she teaches him Uno and gives him her deck of cards. He can't count that well, and colors are a little hard for him, but it helps him to make things into a game. She can always make another deck, just like she did with this one. They stay up making a big fort out of sheets and emergency blankets from the pack. After they wash up and brush their teeth, *yes that means you Naruto*, they fall asleep in it too.

Having a small toddler snooze on her belly is oddly comforting, and she finds herself smiling. She has no idea what she is doing anymore, and somehow, that doesn't seem like a bad thing.

AN: DOMESTIC RYUISHI! AHHH! Seriously though, look at her mom the hell out of that child. She can't help but wan to take

care of cute things. In this chapter we also see that Ryuishi is working through some PTSD, and that Orochimaru is a surprisingly efficient counselor who will also pierce your eyes for you. More mentions of Kisame and Zabuza because she might be a little broody over them.

That being said, I want to post a few side stories I have written for this story under a new title, but I need to collect more. I have a few already, but their just things like what the academy instructor thought of Zabuza and Ryuishi, or what Kisame thinks about fighting.

There is some people questioning Ryuishi's sexuality, also. I do not mean to bait anybody, and if you ask, I will tell.

Now, we give thanks to the reviewers. THEY'RE GREAT. We thank the followers, favoriters, and in the darkness lurkers.

We also thank the great and capable beta Enbi, who is also totally cool.

Now for another one of these fun time questions:What are my readers headcannons for Ryuishi? As in, what weird habit do you think she has/ what do you think others think of her?

Meeting the Bare Breasted Brawler

I do not own Naruto.

Ryuishi spends an inordinate amount of time doing dumb shit with Naruto.

It isn't the innocent and affectionate playtime she has with Gaara, where she retains at least a fraction of her maturity. With Naruto, it is like she is shedding all of her accumulated age, and for the first time in years, longer than this body has been alive, she is a child again. She shows him cool tricks she discovered when she was young, loping through cliffsides and woods in another world. She plays with him like she remembers playing with her brothers, wrestling and insulting and being generally crass. Ryuishi plays pretend, and she picks him up and spins him around the same way she spun her sister.

It aches deep inside her ribs when she does things like that. She almost feels like she is trying to replace them, and part of her is livid at herself, ashamed and guilty for the behavior. It tells her that she must not have loved them at all, to do such sacred things with other people.

The rest of her says that no one can ever, ever replace her family, not in a thousand lifetimes. She feels like crying half the time she plays these melancholy games anyway, and she constantly has to remind herself that she is honoring them, honoring their memory.

So, sneakily, because they're avoiding patrols and shinobi groups, she takes him to the creekside and shows him how to catch crawfish with his bare hands without them pinching him and determinedly enjoys it. She teaches him how weird slugs are, and how much weirder they get when you put salt on them, and then regrets because he throws one at her. They laugh when she belches after

breakfast one morning, and then absolutely lose it when he does the same after.

In all honesty, she is a week and three quarters in and feels like everything is going great, which is probably exactly why it takes a steep turn for the worse.

She and Naruto are coming back from a day of playing in the woods where she taught him the joy of gymnastics when she feels it. It prickles along the back of her neck like a tick and crawls down her spine in a distinct and uncomfortable way.

She is being watched.

She turns her head discretely, still smiling her trademark grin, but her dark eyes are narrowed a little bit more than usual. She scans the crowd of civilians they are blending in with, passing over unfocused faces and nonchalant social activities until she locks on to a hooded figure with dark glasses staring right at her.

Her skin crawls and she knows that face. *Aburame*. The one from the river side, and he probably knows exactly who she is now.

Oh dicks! Oh dicks! Seventeen wieners on a stick in a shit-storm! Fuckfuckfuckfuckity fuck FUCK- she screams inside her head, squeezing a bit tighter on the little hand in hers. A part of her immediately struggles to take control, and several thoughts dance through her head.

The Aburame can't attack, not here, not surrounded by civilians. He would not only endanger every one of their lives, but set off a village wide panic and deal a huge blow to the trust people put in village security. He can't see Naruto clearly because the boy is too small, at leg level in the crowd, which might have changed that fact.

She can't bolt because Naruto is right fucking here, holding her damn hand. She can't fight because of the same reasons he can't, but more importantly, she doesn't trust herself to be able to do it

without losing control. She doesn't know the beetle user's rank, but usually, taking out missing nin is left to those capable of completing B to A-rank missions, especially in a village whose strength lies in teamwork. More than likely, she has a short window of time to get moving. She is suddenly very glad that she is carrying her bag with her.

Naruto is staring up at her, eyes wide and maybe a little scared. She knows he is picking up on how tense she is, how very nervous she has suddenly become. Sky blue orbs peer around at thigh level before glancing up at her.

She stares down, and he looks like he has never seen her before.

He really hasn't, she thinks to herself. Not this part, and she hopes he never sees this part in whole, because already she can feel something inside of her sliding back, regressing into a wartime mentality. She has to consciously not clamp down on his hand hard enough to hurt, the way she knew Kisame or Zabuza would let her. She kneels down in front of him, and the Aburame is already gone, nowhere to be seen.

"Sunshine," Ryuishi whispers, her free hand going to his face, "Beautiful, precious Sunshine, I have to go."

He looks stricken, but still frightened by this new side. "Why?" he demands. She lies before she even knows she is doing it.

"I'm a garbage fairy, right?" He nods. "So I have a lot of important stuff to do, and right now there is some trash that needs to be taken care of."

The hidden meaning amuses her than more than she thought entirely proper. Hot *damn* do Aburame freak her the fuck out.

"I'll be back, I promise. As soon as I can," she says hurriedly, eyes darting around. His grim countenance brightens a fraction, and the small smile he sends her warms her heart. Naruto looks a little teary

eyed, but more than that he looks scared. She doesn't know if it is that he is afraid she will leave him forever or if he is still picking up on her fear.

She tugs him close and he stumbles into one of her hugs, warm and tight. She prays that no one knows why she is here, that everybody assumes she is spying or sabotaging or whatever in hell's name regular missing nin do.

"Go straight home Sunshine, and try not to tell anyone about fairies. We're supposed to be secret." He snuffles and nods against her shoulder, and shit, that's two kids she has made cry. *Good one, asshole*, she thinks to herself.

"Stay safe," she whispers, pressing a quick kiss to his forehead and taking off before he can stop her. Time is ticking away, and she has no idea when backup will arrive. She wishes she could do this better, make him more dinners and meals, teach him more games. In the future, she has to remind herself. There will be more time.

She jogs through the streets, plastering a frustrated, exasperated expression on her face. More 'civilian that forgot her keys' than 'missing nin with PTSD repressing symptoms and also running from authorities'. Nobody is alarmed, and she makes it to the residential apartment areas before she spots her pursuers.

The shadows appear in her peripherals and for a second, in her stressed state, she mistakes them for her old teammates, but that isn't right. Kisame didn't move like living liquid on rooftops, lightning fast with the face of a canine. Zabuza did not stare at her through a bone white cat mask. Not for the last time she wishes she had learned to fight in glasses, or actually remembered to bring them other places than her house in Suna.

ANBU, she thinks deliriously. She can do this, there's only two of them. No need to even get violent, just shake them off her tail.

They follow her from either side, a classic flanking maneuver meant to herd her more than anything else, feinting from the rooftops above like they're going to attack. Her hind brain snaps and hisses inside of her, wanting to lash out, but she keeps moving. There is a fork in the road ahead, and she is coming up with a plan.

Ryuishi puts on a burst of speed, suddenly sprinting far above the everyday laborer's level, and comes to the center of the forked roads, her hunters thrown for a second by the change. They are thrown again when she uses the momentum of her legs, punches the ground with her feet, and flings herself through a fifth story apartment window.

Ryuishi notices a startled man with a child on his lap, hangs a hard left, and starts picking random stuff up on her way. She bursts out of a door and into a hallway, and she begins picking doors at random, flinging whatever she has behind her. She keeps going, pushing forward through another apartment with a bored woman eating lunch, before jumping out her bathroom window to the next building. She sacrifices speed for maneuverability, using her dexterity to jump and spin over furniture and through rooms, hurling miscellaneous objects all the way. Hardcore parkour, she snorts inside her head.

The hunters are just as trapped as she is in these close quarters and must do the same, only she bets they are having a harder time jumping over sofas and tipped fridges and through random windows and broken walls. She knows the path she is taking, they do not, and she is throwing shit at them.

ANBU's specialty is secrecy, but hers is chaos.

"EAT MY DICK, ANBU!" she screams, flinging something behind her. It is only a second after it leaves her hand that she realizes she has picked up an inordinate amount of toilet paper. Her subconscious is probably trying to tell her something, but for the life of her she has no idea what.

A dark haired woman with a book in her hands looks up at her, stunned, and Ryuishi throws her a wink before breaking down the wall with a well-aimed kick and diving through, twisting midair and pelting the duo behind her with white fluffy hell. They swipe at each other and pieces of soft, sturdy two ply explode around them like downy feathers as they fall. She laughs, because half of her is telling her to kill them while the other part is expounding on how ridiculous this is.

She takes the rooftops this time, because she can feel how close the damn city walls are at this speed. The forest she takes Naruto to is never far away from them in the first place.

She sprints through houses, and each one holds a new group of people to be stunned, but the ANBU are gaining again, and she has to throw them off balance somehow. They can't get too used to things. She breathes in deep, swallowing a huge amount of air.

"I'LL TELL THE WHOLE WORLD YOU'RE THE BABY DADDY, YOU CHEATING BASTARD," she screeches, and one man clutches his chest in shock as they speed past, looking absolutely scandalized. The taller of the duo, the one with the canine (or vulpine, or marsupial, whatever) mask stumbles at her words while the other one powers through. His misstep costs him precious feet between them, and she has to keep going, pushing this past the point of believable. She knows that it can turn horrendously, ridiculously violent, and she isn't ready to do that, not here, not around non-combatants.

So she makes it unbelievable, makes it weird, makes it uncomfortable. She emulates social faux pas in a society that values politeness and privacy in intimate matters. She gets raunchy in a world where losing face is a heavy burden. She attacks their honor, their pride, because she knows how much it can throw them. The fact that it's fucking hilarious also factors in.

"I SAID NO THREESOMES," she shouts, spinning like a top and hurling the last big roll of toilet paper, watching the glorified butt

napkins unfurl and stream out. This time a whole family gasps as they blur through their living room and out the wall, onto another rooftop. The black hooded figures both flinch at this, and she gains even more ground. Surprisingly, the roll hits the tall one in the mask and knocks it to the ground, but she is turning too quick to see a face, running like a bat out of hell for the village wall that is looming overhead.

She channels too much chakra to her feet and pushes off the same time she lets it explode the tile underneath, propelling her forward like a rocket. The sudden thrust into multiple G-force whips her bangs back from framing her face and pushes her breasts flat into her ribs. It is only a momentary discomfort, because she is hurtling towards the towering stone structure like a fucking bullet.

She compresses down, outstretching her hands and feet as part of her coats her hands and feet with sticky energy and tenses her muscles, slamming into the concrete like a fist to the face. She releases the tautness in her muscles, using her limbs to change velocity. She springs upward, using the unspent inertia to leap up the wall on all fours like a leopard on the savannah.

One, two, three great bounds and she is suddenly high above the world, and the view is fucking fantastic. Trees and rivers for miles ahead of her, a sprawling expanse of lush green forests and mighty blue waters. The horizon is far away where robin's egg blue melts into blasts of emerald. She loves shit like this, because it's so close to flying. She can't help the little whoop that escapes her lips as she flips over the wall, letting herself tumble gracefully as she freefalls downward.

Her hands go to her calves underneath her pants, and they rip through the bandages that were binding the end of her meteor hammer to her legs. Gleaming silver bladed chain erupts out of her pant leg like a particularly weird snake and she pulls tight, tugging the length free.

On a side note, it had been a ridiculously hard task to hide approximately eight and a half meters of heavy ass steel chain, including weighted blades, on her person. It most likely doubled as weight training at this point, too. In the end though, she discovered that not only could loose-fitting, baggy black cargo pants hide shit tons of candy in their pockets, but shadows fell on them in such away that nobody would notice if you had lumpy legs if you got them in a shade dark enough. Which she does.

She palms the chain in her hand and sets it whirling as she falls, flinging it out like an extension of her body and letting the weight drag her out of free fall, trailing behind it as she slides into the canopy between branches. Her free hand lashes out to grasp a young branch, supple and flexible enough to not break as she forces herself to spin on it, dissipating the force of her fall in three rapid circles.

She flings herself forward again, pushing herself to sprint as fast as she can go. She bought time by being unpredictable, but now she has to flee for real.

Ryuishi ruminates on how much she hates sprinting as the trees blur around her, instead focusing on how familiar it feels.

She isn't in the war, she thinks. She cannot smell blood and feces- the sharp tang of fear and desperation does not hang in the air beside mist and fog. She is here, surrounded by trees and nature and peace.

She can feel the shadows, those ANBU assholes, closing in.

They have changed tactics, nipping at her heels instead of herding her in. She knows this one too. They want to wear her out, push her until she is too exhausted to fight well enough. And she knows she isn't fast enough to lose them, doesn't have enough endurance to outlast them. There is no time for clever escape plans. The world is forcing her to do what she does best.

She has to fight.

The only advantage she has is that she gets to choose where she makes her stand, and she knows where she has always done best.

Ryuishi dashes to the nearest source of water, the snaking river she saw from high above. She leaps from the branches of an old tree and flies through the air, landing on a single foot. The young criminal whirls on her heel to face the incoming, planting the other leg a shoulder-width apart, and bends slightly at the knees, another quip falling from her full, plum colored lips.

"You know-" she starts, only to startle to a stop when she catches sight of her hunters. Oh merciful fucking Christ on a bicycle, she thinks to herself, she is as fucked as a cat in heat.

Ryuishi really should have made the connection when she saw the dog mask. Really, it should have been obvious who the fuck was chasing her. Thinking about it, she might have had the passing thought that it was an Inuzuka, but the lack of a familiar by the figure's side should have given it away.

Now, faced with silver hair that defies gravity and a half mask that covers the bridge of his nose to the bottom of his throat, she really wishes that she had come at this diplomatically instead of accusing them of being her baby daddy. It's still weird, she thinks, to see these two dimensional characters as living people.

"Hatake Kakashi," she laughs, "As I live and breathe. What an honor it is, to meet the Copy-Nin himself."

The stone-faced man doesn't react as he crouches on the branch she just leapt from, staring her down with one eye. He thinks that she looks nothing like the photo in the bingo books anymore, the one taken before the growth caused by puberty.

Watanabe Ryuishi looks deceptively normal. Bronze skinned and muscular, she could pass for almost civilian, a laborer perhaps, but

he knows better. She is the Kiri no Ningyo, part of the infamous Chigiri no Kaijuu, the Monsters of the Bloody Mist. An intimidating title for the group that had cut its teeth on the blood-soaked battlefields of the front lines in the Third Shinobi War.

By bingo book standards she was the weakest of the three, but it would be hard not to be when competing with two of the Seven Swordsmen of the Mist's apprentices. The years she has spent on the run and in hiding will have only made her stronger, with or without her team.

Kakashi curses the fact that all the data he has to work with is outdated and unreliable, because the Mist was never completely forthcoming on why an eleven-year-old girl had such a high bounty placed on her head upon defection, let alone the A-rank status. Looking at her now, he wishes he knew, because he doesn't believe the teenage girl using whore's sign language at his partner deserves that high of a rating.

"Why is that missing nin asking you if you enjoy fellatio?" he asks Tenzo under his breath, hoping that his partner might fill him in on something he missed.

The blank mask that turns toward him answers nothing, and Kakashi realizes that his partner probably doesn't know Kiri's dirty sign language. This is actually probably the first he is hearing about the propositioning. There will be a talk later, he can feel it in his bones.

She pauses in the hand signal for a moment, appearing to consider something. "Wait, how old are you two again?"

Kakashi and Tenzo say nothing to this, and she takes a moment to do some math in her head, based on old, half forgotten trivia facts. Okay, Zabuza was the same age as Kakashi when they met. She is two years younger than both Kakashi and Zabuza. If she's fifteen then that makes Kakashi seventeen. God dammit, why is telling ages so hard for her?

She has no clue what age his partner is, because to her, he looks anywhere from nineteen to twenty-five. Just to be safe though, she is going to stop this. Maybe. Probably? Perhaps she should try and run away again. When she takes a step backward, both eyes are glued on her. What is her life even-?

"Don't suppose you'll let me go? Because despite Konoha's reputation as morally haughty, uptight bastards, you're actually nice guys?" she tries, and judging from the look on their faces, that's gonna be a no. Well, that's kind of her last shot for now. If she dies here, she's had a good run... she guesses. Not really. She regrets not taking up that pretty brunette woman's offer of a one night stand, and maybe all the bullshit she has done to other people. Also, she really wishes she had splurged on that ice cream yesterday, even if it would have made her sick.

"Well this is some bullshit," she announces to her quiet companions, spinning the chain in her hand to life, listening to the noises that become warped through the action. She can't kill them, because she actually has some idea of what at least one of them can become, and it's kind of important. She can't run because they're faster than her. She's having to suppress mild flashbacks, she left a little kid crying, she can't hit on anybody and nobody is answering back.

This is all that stupid fucking Aburame's fault. If that whole clan didn't scare her more than almost literally anything else in the world, she would do something about it. As it stands, she's going to start leaving tribute on their property in the hopes that her gifts will appease them and they will never touch her with their awful, bug-filled bodies again. The thought of it alone makes her want to cry.

Ryuishi takes a second to be proud of herself for never letting Kisame and Zabuza find out about her intense and full bodied revulsion to beetles. Kiri would have burned a lot faster if one of them had so much as shoved a June bug in her general direction. She remembers giving her best friend from her past life a solid bruise for that type of dickery.

Kakashi watches as the missing nin readies her stance. He knows for a fact that she is the lone survivor of the Mist Academy Massacre, a monster born in dark heart of Kiri, nursed on deception and cruelty. A genjutsu mistress and a taijutsu expert, not to mention her skill with the bladed chain in her hands and subterfuge. He cannot go into this fight half cocked, not even with a partner by his side.

He tenses subtly and Tenzo follows his lead, everyone on the field observing each other, waiting for the first strike, or an opening to deliver one.

He blinks, opens up both eyes, and then immediately regrets it as her chakra pathways reveal themselves. It is only years of training that keep him anchored to the tree branch below him. He wobbles and wishes he could look away, but the horrifying sight in front of him keeps him fixated.

He lets out a wet choke, and the young man beside him stiffens further, calling on the trees around him as he launches wooden beam after wooden beam. She dances away with a shout of "Oh what the fuck, you too?" and, disregarding how unsettling it is that she can identify wood release on sight and connect the dots to who wields it, he thinks watching her move is even more awful.

Her eight gates look like something out of a horror movie, writhing with tentacles of a contamination he cannot name, and the limited precognition of her movements given to him from his sharingan show him afterimages of those undulating horrors, breaking every natural law possible. They move when they should be still and infect places that should have killed her long ago, and even as he watches he grows more nauseous. He doesn't know what they are or what they can do, but looking at them is foul and unnatural. Something in the most basic, primordial part of his brain wants him to flee from it, this nameless substance that somehow feels hungry and empty and forever based on appearance alone.

Kakashi watches the outline of her body sail over a thick wooden beam, flipping upside down to land on it with her hands, her legs

kicking a bladed edge towards Tenzou. He promptly rips off his mask to projectile vomit down the side of the tree.

Closing his crimson eye, he slips the mask back over his face, noting how polite it is that she hasn't attacked him while he heaved. He doesn't relish the taste of bile in his mouth or the smell of stick he will never be able to pick out of this mask, but now that he can only see her physical appearance, the horrible feeling in his gut seems to settle down.

He wonders what living with that tainted chakra must be like.

"It's really hard to not make boner related wood jokes right now!" she informs his partner, and he rethinks his pondering. It's probably not that hard.

Kakashi leaps down, ignoring his queasiness to join in the fray. A barrage of kunai are streaming through his fingers before he fully acknowledges he made the choice to do so.

Ryuishi back-bends from the handstand and pushes herself to her feet, treating the thick wooden length as a balance beam, twisting around with the other half of her weapon, letting it sweep them from the air and hurl them in some random ass direction. With hands full of chain she flashes through signs- *monkey, rat, tiger, dragon, horse, dragon* -and molds her chakra like a net, feeling the river water rise to her call like a heady shot of whiskey in her veins.

"Suiton: Ja no Kuchi!" she expels, her husky command accented by the sound of raging river. An large snake emerges from the liquid, its mouth racing towards who she now knows to be Yamato... or Tenzo, or whatever the fuck his name is. She mentally jots down 'thank Orochimaru for forcibly teaching her jutsu' right underneath 'berate Orochimaru for performing experiments on children, then letting them grow up to assault future students.' She isn't sure when she'll get around to it, but it might happen. One day. Maybe. Perhaps? Oh look, Hatake has grabbed part of her chain. That can't be good.

She smells ozone in the air and feels her hair beginning to stand up on its own as he channels chakra to his hand. Shit, she forgot that bastard had lightning nature, and she quickly pumps her chakra down into the metal. Water will amplify the attack and make it go both ways, not to mention most people get grossed out by the Void touching them. It's why medic-nin hate her, and why she can't learn any iyo-ninjutsu herself. She makes eye contact and gritty onyx meets storm grey in the world's trickiest game of chicken.

"First one to let go is the biggest bitch," she remarks.

The chakra meets in the middle and Ryuishi can feel her nervous system begin to scream out in agony as a circuit completes itself in her body. She wraps her denim insulated leg around the chain stretching between the two and tugs it back and down with her calf. The man... boy... teenager with gritted teeth stumbles forward, refusing to let go. Somewhere in the background, Tenzo lets out a strangled yelp as a giant snake made of water crashes him against a tree.

(He will remark later that the attack could have, should have, killed him. That much crushing force located on one area should have left him broken. Instead he was soaked to the bone and his ribs were bruised to hell, but still in fighting condition.)

Electric shock is one hell of a thing, she thinks. Memories of tasers and friendship hijinks from a past life float by, followed closely by the smell of sickly sweet corpses cooked alive on the front lines. She shakes the thoughts loose and kicks sideways with her chain wrapped leg, off the beam and over the river below, watching the man refuse to give in. His fist coils tighter and he follows the chain as it tugs him over the edge.

If she hadn't counted on him doing it, the weight of him literally swinging from her weapon below the beam would have sent her tumbling. As it stands, she just coats her foot in chakra and weaves from the waist up around the wooden beam coming from behind. That shit could have taken her head off.

Instead, a solidly plated foot finds itself in her kidney from the back, followed by what feels like the graze of a kunai. She is going to bruise tomorrow, she just knows it. She immediately stops channeling the chakra to her foot, letting the force of the kick push her off balance and to the side, out of the way of the blade. The action causes her to tumble off the beam. Her chain catches over the top of the wooden structure and untangles from her leg. Kakashi is promptly tugged up as she falls down, still holding tight to one end. It is the weirdest set of human weights ever, electricity and all.

Another leg comes rushing toward her as the teenager on the other end of her weapon tries to literally kick her face off as she dangles, but she manages to twist out of the way just in time.

"Stop with the face!" she cries out, feeling defensive of her good features. Orochimaru already ruined her long slender neck when he cut her vocal chords, this is just adding insult to injury.

A barrage of kunai from above is her answer.

She looks up, and the bright blue sky is imposed with overcast grey clouds. She hears explosions in the distance and the screams of the dying. Her shirt is stained with sticky blood that oozes across her hands, making her grip slippery and slick. She can see her breath in the cold and she can't feel her fingers anymore, not with the snow on the ground and chill in the air.

Her vision is full of blades like rain coming toward her. Her hands are full of chain and chakra, and the only option is her legs. She contorts, her legs going over her head once more, her arms parallel the weapon in her hands, wrists bent unnaturally. Her feet kick out rhythmically, batting the weapons away.

The shock of blue river beneath her shakes her from her memories. She can't keep fighting like this. These two are prodigies, stronger than she can ever hope to be, and they are kicking the shit out of her. She needs another distraction.

She feels a tug on the chain above her and a yelp. "Is this electrified?!" she hears the mokuton user cry.

Oh right, she had managed to lock the screaming agony running through her body in a little box in her head. Huh, she is probably going to regret that, because she can vaguely feel her heart protesting in her chest and her hands are numb. She should fix that.

Ryuishi turns her head towards Kakashi, who is dangling away from her, still not letting go of the chain. At this point, she isn't sure either of them can let go anymore. Electricity is kind of fucked up like that. Either way she breathes in deep, molding chakra without hand seals. This isn't a jutsu, more of a trick. She feels the nature of it build to an unbearable pressure inside of her gut. Her cheeks bulge out and she purses her mouth.

A raging blast of water erupts from her lips like a geyser, knocking Kakashi back. Some of it may be puke, she isn't sure. Technically it's the first step to another jutsu, but she thinks this way works also.

The teenager goes flying and without the counterbalance the chain in her hand slips around the wood. As she drops head first to the river below, she is very glad that she had managed not to lose control of her bladder while being electrocuted.

Thoughts flood her brain as she narrows her body and braces for entry into the water, her hands like stiff claws around the metal links. She needs a distraction, one big enough to stop two professionally trained hunters from following her trail. What can stop two teenage boys from attempting to pursue?

She formulates plans as the river swallows her, liquid frothing white from the force of her entry. Underwater, the noise quiets and she swims like her title, propelling herself with undulations from her lower body, moving in weaving, zigzagging pattern.

Kakashi can't electrocute the whole river, not with so much moving water, but they are still raining down metal and jutsu nonetheless.

She has to dodge around tree roots bursting up from the river bottom, but it is nothing to her. She has spent years honing muscle groups and pushing past lung capacities. Everything about her body is a weapon now.

An idea slides into place. If Zabuza can do it, then she can too. The bronze skinned woman explodes from the surface like an enlightened spirit, her eyes glimmering with mirth and determination. Grey and brown eyes lock onto black and she smiles big and wide, letting her plump lips stretch across her cheeks. A single hand detaches from the chains and rises to her top, centering over the layers of cloth. If her body is a weapon, her breasts are flash grenades.

Ryuishi rips off her shirt.

And then Hatake Kakashi-seventeen year old jounin, ANBU captain-loses his grip on reality. Because missing-nin don't just rip their tops off in the middle of battle. Right?

B-B-But there they were, a pair of breasts out in the afternoon sunlight. It is like a... a...

"Kai!" he shouts, flaring his chakra out. But it isn't a genjutsu.

His face heats and he chokes loudly, eyes desperately trying to look away. Boobs! She had just-and now there were... He ducks an incoming kick to his head and reflexively sweeps for the attackers feet. She jumped over and-Oh! Oh! Oh... They jump with her, the perky mounds-

A heel drop catches him square in the jaw and he tumbles back. He sees the taut figure of Tenzo attempting to come to his defense, awkwardly advancing with close range fighting, only none of the jabs or grabs seem appropriate anymore. Every time he ducks and weaves he gets on breast level, and every bone in his body is screaming against touching a woman's chest without consent, even if it is with a fist. Even if she is an enemy.

The fighting begins to lose intensity and structure. The nuke nin seems to be the only one willing to go in close anymore, and she is soaking wet and topless.

Kakashi feels like his world is upside down as he flings a bewildered handful of shuriken at the target. She dodges nimbly, dancing out of the way of most of them while lashing out at his kohai with a chain wrapped fist. She manages most, but hisses as one grazes her chest.

"Fuck! Right in the tit!"

He swallows the urge to apologize, trailing the line of red down the swell of her breast.

Not too big, not too small, just average-but now the shallow cut (more of a scratch, really) exists and it must sting because he can see the sweat beading on the curve of it, slowly sliding down just around the dusty peak of a nip-FOCUS! He needed to focus! He isn't some upstart teenager, he is a shinobi, a jounin and that meant that Kakashi can handle this missing nin, even if she is half naked!

Tenzo's stiff defense is broken by a particularly punishing knee to his already jutsu bruised ribs and he stumbles back, giving her room to flash through more hand seals.

"Mizu Bunshin no Jutsu!" her husky voice cries, and then there are fifteen topless criminals, swarmed around the two, each one with a jiggling set of breasts and a teasing smile. They move like one and the tables turn as the two teenagers are put on defense, trying to tactfully and non-offensively take down multiple opponents in a way that can be written in reports that won't drag them in for questioning.

The thought of the report for this makes Kakashi's head hurt.

It takes them much longer than normal to smash through a taijutsu expert's water clones, and by the time they are done they are soaked to the bone and thoroughly embarrassed. They are put to

even greater shame when they realize that the original is nowhere to be found after the chaos. On his signal they move out, setting up a grid pattern to search.

They spend two days attempting to make out a trail, only to find that there is none to follow. The topless woman had most likely waited under the waters surface the whole time until they left and followed the river back out the other side of the village before disappearing.

Kakashi will never be able to forget or repress the memories his first encounter of that toilet paper wielding, foul-mouthed, breast-baring missing nin. Years afterward, he will wake to the awful feeling of awkwardness and confusion and oh-god-what-do-I-do-make-it-stop. Tenzo will block the event from his memory in its entirety, locking it away in his head somewhere no one can ever find it. When asked, he will state his first encounter with the missing nin is entirely different from this, but something in the back of his mind will squirm unpleasantly.

The report does end up raising many questions, and quiet rumors will spread. Not about the ANBU agents themselves, because everyone knows Mist nin are tricky. Especially genjutsu using Mist nin.

But the legend of the bare-breasted brawler is born.

AN:SO, if somebody wants to know, this is Ryuishi's life now. Strong enough to keep up with two prodigy children at an insane level, but more likely to turn everything ridiculous to get away. No shame in that, or being topless. I think Tenzo might have shown up a little earlier than cannon, but there still are no timelines, so I'm fucking lost as hell. If anything, we'll call it a ripple effect of Ryuishi's shenanigans. This is also the start of a very weird arc. Also, I defend myself and say that having been in many fights myself, making them weird has always worked well for me, no matter the skill of my opponent.

Thank you to all my reviewers, favoriters, followers and Lurkers. It's you guys who keep me going.

Another big thanks to my beta Enbi, who is the tranquil zen at the center of my tsunami storm. Bless her face.

As for the fun question at the end of this chapter: What do you think the other cannon/non-canon characters think of Ryuishi? Even the ones she hasn't met yet?

Meeting a Lazy Day at Home

I do not own Naruto.

Ryuishi snuggles deeper into her sheets, rubbing her face sleepily against the plump grey pillow underneath her head. Wearily she stretches her limbs which are sprawled around her, taking up as much room as possible. She huffs out a soft breath, relishing in the feel of smooth sheets against her bare legs and firm cushion under her side. Soft morning light filters through her window, landing in a patch on her calf and warming that leg more than the other, illuminating bronze skin with a golden glow. Her waterfall of inky black hair fans out in the space around her, tangled and free from the braid she had put it in the night before.

Dressed in a tank top and panties, she thinks that maybe the bed is too big. Her arms and legs can't even touch the sides completely, even when stretched out fully, and it might be a bit ridiculous. Thick, dark lashes close over coal eyes and she imagines large, warm bodies on either side, muscular arms draped over her waist and under her head. She recalls the smell of weapons oil and cold ocean water, the feel of coarse hair and a hand in each of hers. Her heart thumps in her chest as she conjures images of wandering hands and soft sighs.

Maybe, a part of her smirks, it is just right.

Her face flushes and she presses it into the pillow fully, hiding it from the world at large. A soft, sleepy groan escapes her plump lips as she tries to erase the image in her head. Motherfucking hormones. Being a teenager again is shit, all of it. Her body is full of weirdness, and her libido goes off at the weirdest times. It is entirely inappropriate, seeing as she is underage and yet mentally older than her peers by decades. Not that she had been particularly chaste at

this age in her past life, but dammit, she was trying try out another side this time.

Outside, the warm sun shines down on bright sand, and the sound of waves rhythmically washing onshore comforts her in her half-sleeping state, easing the burn from her cheeks. Then she remembers what happened when she escaped Konoha and presses her face deeper into the pillows, attempting to suffocate herself to death. Sure, it had worked and all, and it's still funny as hell. Yes, it is definitely a tool she is going to use in the future. Whether her opponent is a pervert, or embarrassed for her, or too polite to actually try to hit her tits, it works both as a deterrent for strikes and a stunning component. That doesn't mean she doesn't feel a little ashamed at it, like, just the tiniest bit.

Her arms slide up until her hands are by her head, clutching tight in the cotton.

Thinking about it, a lot of her is conflicted about a lot of things. She thinks it might stem from being able to understand multiple points of view on a single subject, and errant personality traits that grew into personifications of said characteristics. It might be a symptom of insanity; she really isn't sure at this point. She also isn't really sure she cares.

Like that, she thinks, both caring a lot about her mental health and finding absolutely no shits to give about it.

If she could pick a path, she would, but it really isn't as easy as it seems. One of her biggest strengths is flexibility, both on the battlefield and off. Her morals can bend and twist just as much as her body, not to mention her emotions and mentality. Really, there are only a few things that are so staunchly wrong in her mind that she would never do them. Things like rape, pedophilia and child abuse are her lines in the sand.

Things like murder and lying, well, they aren't so clear cut in her mind. Murder is the basis in this world, the currency of almost every

village. Even in her past life, she didn't have a clear opinion on it because it was a case by case thing. She doesn't think she is justified to judge people, because no one is ever truly better or worse than someone else, just more skilled in different areas. Thus, what right does she have to end a life without understanding it? Really, there is none, but also people were trying to fucking kill her so fuck them, the first one to die loses.

This doesn't mean she wouldn't cut a bitch either, because maiming, crippling, and traumatizing are so very different from simple slaughter. There is that part of her that revels in violence and torture, and no matter how small it might be, she cannot ignore it. To do so would be very dumb, it would be denying a problem that, in this world, can quickly grow out of hand.

Lying is another very shaded area. She maintains the right to say whatever she pleases, and if someone believes her and acts on it, then on their own head be it. Then again, she is one of the best liars ever and she regrets it sometimes, because not all of them have purpose. Sometimes they emerge like a compulsion, tumbling out before she can stop them, and people believe them even if she is desperately screaming for them to think about it for a fucking second inside her head.

There are consequences for her misdirections as well, ones she counts on happening. Is it ethically sound for her to manipulate people by telling them untruths? No. Is it morally wrong to leave them in a situation that she can solve by lying? Yes. It's a catch 22- she can't be honest but she can't let things stay the way they are, and there is no right path anyways.

In her mind, there might not even be a 'right' at all. The jury is still out. There are just too many options, too many viewpoints and situations for there to be an ultimate truth. It's a sticky, in-depth philosophy and there are just too many variables to consider when speaking about the world at large.

Ryuishi sighs, and her hot breath fills the fabric clasped tight to her face, blowing back hot and muggy against her cheeks.

Gross. Enough in depth thought, it's time to brush her teeth, take a shower, eat some food, take her medicine, and drink some tea. This is her designated time off, and she isn't going to waste it by thinking about the great mysteries of her psyche. That shit is a tangle she does not want to mess with. So she heaves herself up and untangles herself from her several hundred thread count sheets, letting her hair curtain around her face. She breathes in the smell of her home-citronella, eucalyptus, lilies, pear blossoms, and ocean-and floppily struggles to her attached bathroom.

Ryuishi strips and stumbles into her enormous shower, appreciating the most expensive room in her house. Maybe it was a waste of money to have three different shower heads with multiple settings, and it might be a bit on the big side, but dammit, she has had a wish for a bathroom like this for two damn lifetimes, all sleek and natural and glorious. She even put in the masonry work herself, tiling in the floors and half the walls with flat stones of varying earthy tones. The grout work is a thing of beauty, something to be very proud of. It had better be, she didn't bust her ass to have it turn out ugly.

She steps inside a space that could fit at least four of her inside of it and closes the glass door behind her with her hand, idly stretching out a foot to turn a nozzle with her toes. Steam begins to tumble out of the spout alongside scalding water, and she takes another step before sliding into the built-in bench to relax a bit.

Ryuishi observes herself a bit as she lets the water soak her skin and warm her bones. The electricity burns on her hands still sting like a bitch, especially after traveling so far without the supplies to tend to them with. She thinks that if she ever is stupid enough to pull a chicken shit move like that again, she deserves it, but also that Hatake Kakashi had let go first and therefore was the biggest bitch. The scrapes on her wrists from Gaara's sand are finally beginning to fade at least, following the path of the bruises he had given her. She looks at her nicely shaped fingernails and thinks that at least no one

seriously fucked up her manicure. Wounds are nothing new to the woman, nor the marks they leave. She had never lived an exactly safe life in either world.

Lazily pouring shampoo into her hands, she wonders about her last visit to Kagami. Ryuishi had planned on staying two weeks with each of the boys, then a week or so with her old Okiya mother, who had become something like the nexus of her network. The world had decided it had other plans, but she was determined to keep up the routine. Maybe not so long with the children because this time they had already met, but enough to really make some sort of impact.

So, a week with each boy, a week with Kagami or the Mumei, and a week at home, not counting travel times and surprise trips. It would be safer if she changed routes each time and randomly showed up in places for humanitarian efforts to keep her image up. It isn't really a schedule, but it will work.

A glob of floral, musky shampoo falls into her eye as she thinks and she curses loudly. The word "MOTHERFUCKER" echoes through her empty home.

She blinks furiously, definitely not crying as she rinses her locks, turning back to the thought at hand. Working a truly amazing amount of conditioner into her hair, she takes a moment to consider her network.

At this point, most of Kagami's whores have settled in nicely all over the continent, not to mention the new ones she herself began to deal with. From the lovely ladies dressed in glittering silks in Wind Country to the dark skinned beauties in intricate leathers of Stone Country, her grasp has definitely spread. This is leaving out Kagami's contacts as well.

It turns out that the sex industry is surprisingly close knit in this world, and as long as nobody is poaching on territory or johns, most are amiable enough to tread with. It is a simple thing-promise protection and health care for the men, and women for rumors and

interesting tidbits. Both of which are provided from either the Mumei themselves or Orochimaru's resources. After all, he benefits from the spread of information himself.

The fact that the 'Rakki Ryuu' can sometimes be found fixing up old and broken down Okiya and leading merchants into towns lacking business doesn't hurt things either.

Already, results are becoming more obvious from her works. Not to mention the nameless community, and there seems to be a bump in civilian education as well. Economic investments are becoming more diverse as some Daimyo turn to look at untapped resources, namely, the people they should have been looking after all along. The lowlifes are beginning to almost regulate themselves under the firm and guiding hands of cunning and educated whores who can work with threats of punishment from the scourge of Kiri, and withholding of goods and services. It might be a bit of a stretch to call it mutual respect, but all the same people are turning towards a larger cause than themselves. With more defined boundaries and synergy among business at the bottom rung, there is less need for shinobi interference.

There isn't a lack to the arms race between Elemental Nations by any means, but there does seem to be more wandering scholars and doctors around as well as a small drop in crime rates. In the last village she had helped out in, a little town near Rice Paddy Country, they had even been a one room school house for the surrounding rural people. Children and adults came into attendance after work in the fields to learn basic characters for the first time in their lives, and practice oral histories. By tallying grain counts themselves they raked in a higher yield with less loss through transit, and she had even pitched in tidbits from half forgotten college Agriculture classes. Leaving fallow fields and switching crops out to let the soil rest, growing a diverse range of goods to help prevent famine by disease and protecting natural pesticides like certain toads, spiders and snakes. Monocultures and crossbreeding for greater yields. She had even roughly written down some Mendel charts and basic

explanations to assist, then donated a whole bunch of paper and ink to help them out.

It surprises her, now that she thinks about it, how far behind this world is in some places and how ahead it is in others. She knows that Orochimaru's work on human mutations, gene therapy and genetics far surpasses her own world's in some aspects. Honestly speaking, that man had come through the small scientific community here and rocked their world. She knew of researchers who would cream their jeans to work with the snake-nin, morals and ethics be damned.

On the other hand, electricity seems to be limited to larger cities, leaving some places to work with candles and lamp oil, and mass transit seems to be something nobody has thought of, profits of ease of import and export be damned. Which is weirder still, because places like Snow Country have fucking trucks and trains for god's sake. Industrial revolution is spotty and more than iffy, because kunai and shuriken are made by blacksmiths instead of factories.

It seems the only world getting revolutionized by the progression of time is the shinobi one, leaving civilians in an odd place. Imagine that, instead of ninja owning trains, farmers did, allowing the transport of mass amounts of food and supply for greater profit, reaching to places that could actually use it. The mess in Ame would have never fucking happened if the everyday person had access to half the opportunities that were readily available to a shinobi or kunoichi.

It is something that the Mumei and her are working on. Last she heard, Orochimaru was treading with the daimyo of the Land of Rice Paddies, hoping to establish a Hidden Village. She knows for a fact that she wants in on that shit, because damn if he isn't clever.

The Land of Rice Paddies is exactly what it sounds like, an agricultural haven. Most of the populace makes a living off the land, which is more than willing to give. It lies in the heart of a fertile crescent, where rivers regularly wash nutrient-rich silt onto the

topsoil and temperate weather lasts yearlong. He is making a grab for farmlands that produce most of the surrounding countries' food, and if he seizes it, no one will be able to touch him without severe consequences.

Dragging a razor across her skin, she smiles. If everything goes smoothly, he will become Kage and produce exceptional shinobi while she spreads some wealth around, upping literacy rates and education.

How long can other countries compete when she introduces the good old-fashioned assembly line? How about three partisan local governments? How hard will it be to sneak in when watermarked documents become regular in border checks? An equivalent currency exchange? Workers rights that establish safety and extend the working age?

With the two of them combined, they might be able to run the other countries into the ground with production rates and economic gain alone.

She thinks about the costs of the Industrial Revolution in her old world and reminds herself to be cautious. There are downsides to each choice as well. Environmental health will suffer if she takes it too far, not to mention dangerous ideals like nationalism that are already so prevalent in this world. She thinks harder about it, the details of turning theory into practice, and the intricate and confusing process. She nervously considers if she has the right to do this, to steal such western ideals and call them better than the ones this world has already. Can she even do things on such a big scale? It all sounds so tiring, like, really fucking exhausting. Is it actually for the betterment of the lives of everyday people, or so she can shape out something resembling her old life inside this new one? It's happening again, that conflict inside of her. The pieces inside her head are disagreeing, arguing inside her skull.

She rinses soap from her skin and conditioner from her hair, switching topics in her head. Simple as it sounds, she nopes right

out of it.

Ryuishi feels like, after breakfast, she should hit the beach and maybe do some fishing in the mangrove swamp. Maybe get some training in later. Those all sound like much better ideas than brooding.

She ends up doing almost none of the above, instead finding the copy of Icha Icha she had bought somewhere and putting on her glasses and bikini to go and read in the sun. She doesn't even bother to put her hair up, instead allowing the butt length waves to air dry and tangle about in the onshore breeze while she plops down in gritty sand.

She takes a moment to appreciate seeing so clearly, the individual grains and the shine on the water. Each little bubble is like a small miracle to her, and she appreciates Orochimaru's gift more than he will ever realize. The thin, black rectangular frames are lightweight and nostalgic, and seeing so clearly is a momentous present in its own right.

Briefly Ryuishi wishes she could wear them other places, like in battle, but she knows she is scatterbrained and irresponsible. The first time she slept in the woods she would lose them, or a minor skirmish with bandits would break them. She isn't willing to do that type of shit. Not that it even really helps her when fighting; she has tried for years to throw better, even with vision aid, and she still sucks balls. Granted, it has become more like five out of ten instead of three, but it isn't enough of a change to permit using it reliably.

So instead she keeps her glasses in a ridiculously immaculate wooden box by her bed and only takes them out during the times she wants to enjoy the beauty of the world around her. She's nearsighted anyway, so reading isn't a huge problem without them, she just likes to see the ink lines so closely. It makes her feel like a hawk.

Icha Icha Paradise is a surprisingly good read for being written by a creepy overgrown fuckboy like Jiraiya, and she might be a little fixated on it right now. There isn't fanfiction or Harry Potter or any good novels anywhere around her, and picking a satisfying read is hard business.

So like every nerd before her, she fulfilled the secret desire of her heart when shopping, and picked this up instead. The woman behind the counter had turned scarlet, and hell if that wasn't a good review.

She lies on her belly and flips it open to a dog eared page.

' Hot breath ghost across his skin, and when he looks up, her jewel eyes are staring down at him. A heavy thud sounds inside his chest and he can feel the soft press of her skin against his, silky smooth and unblemished in the moons light. '

Well, okay, it might just be literotica, but hell, she's a teenager again and there isn't any internet porn in this world. She has to take what she can get. After all, she only has a few more days before she has to head out towards Suna again, and she wants to be refreshed and relaxed in all ways when she sees Gaara.

AN: So, a slow chapter, but still a very important one. There is world building, and a better insight to what the nameless are doing. Plot picks up here in a few chapters, where Ryuishi takes a more hands on approach in her schemes. There will be more canon characters introduced as well, but I needed to lay some more foundation as to what's going down.

That being said, I have oneshots from this fic I would like to publish as sidefics, but don't want to overload my current beta who is working on so much stuff already. So, suggestions?

Thank you for all of those who reviewed, you honestly make my day. Another thank you for my favoriters, followers, and lurkers.

We give thanks to the gracious and kind Enbi, my beta who puts up with my nagging.

As for the next round of questions: If, hypothetically, there was ever to be romantic subplot, which I'm still wary about, and it would be subplot, like quietly mentioned subplot, who would you ship with Ryuishi? This can include characters not mentioned yet, or ones you think would be crack pairings.

Meeting a Life Lesson

I do not own Naruto.

Somewhere among the shifting dunes and windswept landscape of Wind Country, a loud, wet pop bursts into life, followed by the sound of a disgruntled 'tch.'

Ryuishi leaps again, flitting across the sandy terrain at high speeds only possible due to a lifetime of training and chakra-enhanced limbs. Around her, beige, tan, and orange tones blur together creating a runny, weird sort of aesthetic that reminds her of a bland and muddy painting.

Irritably, she blows another bubble with her gum, letting the mint flavored candy grow into something almost ridiculous in size before popping it. No matter how refreshing and soothing the flavor, the arid climate still dries out the back of her throat like no one's business. It feels achy and gritty back there, and she has to stick to the rationed amounts of water she doles out. This means she has to suck it up and deal with her dry ass mouth. It wouldn't be so bad if she hadn't got caught in a surprise sandstorm on the way to Suna, she thinks, that sucker emerged from absolutely nowhere. The wall had just snuck up on her, a towering barrier of grit and wind that touched both earth and sky, full of debris and raw power.

She couldn't outrun it, and there was no high point to find so quickly. Instead she had ended up wetting a bandanna and tying it around her face like a mask and hiding out on the leeward side of a small outcropping, hunched between stones as the world became clouded and visibility cut down to a few feet. She even found out that she had shared that hidey hole with a viper and some errant scorpions, when they peeked out from cracks as particles scraped across her skin and caught in her eyelashes. It had been a Mexican standoff between the three forces until the storm died out hours later, and she

defeated them both by flooding the area with an energy consuming Suito technique.

So, low on supplies, she had to make some decisions. Like traveling at night to avoid the most heat intensive hours and losing hydration. Rationing water until the safety of Suna, even though her throat is scratchy as hell. Besides, it's better than literally dying from exposure and poor planning. Plus, she's only a few hours out any way, at some point she'll have to slow down to civilian speeds to keep up her act, but not quite yet.

The dark sky above is sorta eerie, and she represses a shiver. It's cold as hell out here at night, and the distant light of the stars somehow seems more like ice shards than anything else. A thin sliver of moon shines just bright enough to cast the landscape in silvery hues. Ryuishi tries not to think about how the moon in this reality is actually the corpse of a giant monster and really hot babe mixed together, because she always used to like the nocturnal light. Now it just seems to be a constant reminder that shit isn't the same anymore, and it bums her out.

She eventually spots the main road and slows her speed down, easily letting weariness consume her limbs to appear as a tired merchant who was brought low by a natural disaster. She lets down some of her hair around her bun and holds her arms across her chest, trying for the 'upbeat but exhausted look' that she has seen some women pull off. The one where people want to naturally help because they wielder of said look just appears so haggard, but refuses to give in with their happy, shoujo can-do attitude. It would probably be better if she was more femininely dressed, but her long hair softens her features enough to pull it off.

If she has the schedule right-and she does, she knows all the schedule of the Hidden Villages, she worked her fuckin' ass off to get them-then a patrol should be coming around this area fairly soon. She looks just non-suspicious enough to get by, and hopefully cute enough to get a guard. Wouldn't that be nice, a strong and capable piece of eye candy for the remainder of the trip. Maybe it will be a

sultry brunette with soft skin and a voice to kill for and legs like woah. Then the two of them can talk about girl stuff... haha... *yeah*, girl stuff. Or maybe a lithe and muscular man who will offer to take her bag, and they can-

She bites the inside of her lip, shaking her head. *Get it together, self!* she thinks, *We are a mature adult for Buddha's sake!*

All her pondering turns out to be a moot point anyways, as no one attempts to stop her or help her out. Distantly she can detect a squadron observing her from afar, taking note of the candy merchant while hidden in the sand and stone. Ultimately though, and she has no idea why, they leave her alone and she has to walk at a normal rate right up to the Suna merchant gates like some sort of untrained peasant. So when she is forced to go through security, she is ill tempered and less than happy. The only upside is that the on-duty guard takes one look at her furiously chewing jaw and cracked lips and hands over a bottle full of water.

Ryuishi sighs as the liquid glides down her throat and memorizes his face, because that man is a godsend and he will be receiving a surprise fruits basket, or candy box, or something like that. Courtesy of a grateful and adorable merchant who just so happens to be a missing nin at times. Or is it a missing nin who is a candy merchant at times? Ah, who cares.

Due to the late hour and her disgruntled appearance, the check takes less time than usual and the waiting period is cut down by at least half due to the lack of people waiting, so she gets through the security in record time. Immediately she heads to a hotel, not too big and not too small, and checks in. It's different from her last one, and the room is a bit small, but after she checks to make sure bed bugs aren't an issue, she collapses full out on the crappy bed.

The next morning, after her hygiene routine, she heads out to peddle candy for a while. Surprisingly, it seems that more than a few brats remember her and drag their parents over to purchase sweets. As predicted, lemon flavored gummies and suckers are still at the height

of popularity, but the new pomegranate ones she has are a close second.

The parents are even beginning to take note of her now, and tons (okay, so maybe like, eight, at most) even make purchases themselves. The stoic faced, emotionless-looking older crowd seems to have a leaning towards her more bitter selection, buying coffee flavored suckers and darker chocolates to sate their cravings. At the prices she offers, it's sort of a steal, and most the money earned here she puts right back into the local economy through hotel visits, restaurant meals, and gratuitous knick-knack shopping.

She has no clue what she is every going to use that fancy ass set of robes for, but hey, she owns them now. The maroon goes with her complexion, even if she is probably never going to wear it.

Ryuishi is so caught up in her thoughts that she never notices a small blur racing towards her from the direction of the Kazekage's tower, eating up ground like no one's business. It's only when her battle instinct takes over and she reflexively outstretches her arms to prevent damage that she comes to her senses.

The people around her suddenly lose interest in her wares and move away like petals on a breeze, leaving the already scarcely populated street near empty. Ryuishi finds that she has an overwhelmingly adorable and emotional child in her hands, staring at her like she hung the damn sun. Again the boy is leaking from his face, big seafoam green eyes scrunched up and what she assumes to be a smile stretched across his cheeks. It's mildly disturbing, because it looks like more of a grimace of pain or a baring of teeth.

"Aneue," Gaara babbles wetly, "Aneue came back. I saw her from the-"

She can't help but chuckle, because good *lord* is this kid overly invested in her, and he is usually so quiet and collected. She has to remind herself that he is, in fact, a four year old to really believe it.

"Hey, I promised, didn't I?" she coos, allowing him to grasp at her shirt, rubbing soothing circles on his back, "I said I'd come back."

He inhales deeply through his nose, and it sounds utterly disgusting. She has disemboweled people and had it sound less gross. Watching him try to put himself together is mildly amusing as well, because the timid boy looks like he is utterly ashamed with himself for losing composure like this, but also like he can't believe she really came back. She feels a pang in her chest because he looks so cute, and she is so very weak in the face of such moe.

"See? It's okay," she singsongs, rearranging her arms to let him rest on her hip. "It's all gonna be good. I even brought something for you," she murmurs, squeezing him in a side hug. His windswept crimson hair tickles her nose, and she resists the urge to sneeze on him.

Suddenly his attitude switches, and the tears begin to stop. He is utterly focused on what she just said, and it brings back memories of nieces and nephews fidgeting in place at family gatherings, waiting impatiently for presents. Those damn animal children would never settle down.

"For me?" he whispers, awestruck.

"That is what I said, isn't it?"

He doesn't answer this time, quietly looking up at her, fists full of fabric and face full of 'gimme'. She is well versed in this game, she thinks, but never has she played it with such a polite kid. She forces herself to remember that Gaara is the son of the Kazekage himself, something akin to a young duke or prince. He must have been well taught in ways of etiquette and manners, which is probably why he is always nagging her about her poor behavior. It must go against everything he has ever learned to cuss and spit and stomp.

Ryuishi briefly wonders what life would have been like for her if she had kept those manners taught to her in the Okiya. How weird would

it have been to be a proper lady? Her thoughts entertain images of some demure version of her trailing two steps behind her boys, offering them subservience and docile characteristics. Probably blushing at the mere thought of sleeping in their rolls with them. Femininity isn't a weakness, she thinks, but for shinobi manners might be.

She snorts. The two of them would have taken her for everything they could.

She can feel the force of Gaara's demanding gaze on the side of her head, attempting to will her into handing over whatever it is through the power of thoughts alone. She smiles and turns to look forward, beginning to head to in a random direction and drawing it out.

"Did you know," she begins, her husky voice lilting into lecture mode, "That sand can be used for many things?"

He doesn't say a word, eyes begging even as he listens to her her nonsense.

"Usually, sand is bad for growing things because it drains so easy, and it isn't great for building on. That doesn't mean it's bad, though. Crafters use sand as an abrasive polish. Bags of it can be used to prevent flooding. Your sand, obviously, can do a lot of things," she tells him. "But the coolest thing sand is used for, in my opinion, is making glass."

At this he blinks, and she interprets it as surprise.

"Now again, glass is used for a lot of things. In my humble opinion though, there is one type that is the most beautiful in the world. It's made from the broken pieces of litter and shipwrecks. The ocean polishes it, wearing down the cutting edges and bringing out hundreds of colors. After some time in the sea, the trash becomes like gems, multifaceted and beautiful," she states, reaching around for the side pocket of her bag.

"It just so happens that one of those sea glass shades almost perfectly matches the color of your eyes," she finishes, fishing out a thick, corded necklace with a dangling piece of frosted glass at the end. A hand immediately releases her shirt and opens up below the piece of jewelry, a silent demand to hand it over.

When she does he snatches it up, peering at the stone-like piece, feeling the coolness of it through his defense. Its edges are softened and the light slides around its surface like it is made of solidified ocean. He has never been to the sea before, but he thinks that it must look a lot like this. He feels a hand under his chin, tilting his head up to look her in the eyes. They are dark and forever, but it seems like there is a little bit of light in them too. Gently, she takes the necklace from him and slips it over his head, letting the glass rest against his collar.

"The lesson is that sand can create as well as destroy, and with a little help from the sea, it can make something beautiful."

His face lights up with understanding and he looks down at the pendant, letting his hands fill themselves with it, feeling the smooth edges. Nimble little fingers run over its surface again and again before he reaches out, wrapping his arms around her neck.

"Thank you, Aneue," he whispers and she laughs, planting a kiss on his forehead.

"No problem, Gaara-kun. Now, how about lunch? What weird food will you have me try this time?"

"Lizard tongue."

She sighs. Like every child, it seems he insists on fixating on his favorite food for every meal.

"How about you try again."

"Goat and cactus."

"Alright, I have never eaten that second one, so let's give it a go."

Gaara leads the way. Well, more like he silently points the way. One hand is constantly fidgeting with his new necklace, while the other one gestures directions wordlessly. They find themselves at the entrance of a smaller establishment with sun-bleached clay walls and a small awning made of brick. It's still in the rounded mound shape that all Suna buildings seem to have, and the air around it is brimming with a spicy, savory scent. When she walks in, smile on her face, the waiter's face turns a pasty white at the sight of the child on her hip, his eyes nervously dancing about, as if not seeing the child will make it not exist. She makes sure to coat on an truly sickening amount of charm.

"T-Table or booth?" he chokes out.

She lets her lips upturn and looks up at him through her lashes, letting her voice soften. "Booth, please."

He bobs his head like an erratic rooster and she can see the exact moment his eyes glance toward her bared midriff. Externally, she continues the act. Internally, she cackles because the boy can't choose whether to be terrified of Gaara or entranced by a little exposed skin.

"Right this way," he says, his voice rising a few octaves. *Adorable*, she thinks. She would eat him alive.

When they are seated, she makes sure to brush her hand against his shoulder and smile. When she goes for her seat she thanks him, and his tanned cheeks turn just the lightest bit of pink.

Good, she thinks again, *if he's focused on me then he'll lay off of the kid.*

The kid who, as it turns out, refuses to leave her side, settling by her like there isn't another side to the table. If it wasn't bad manners, she

is almost certain he would have sat directly in her lap, the twerp. The clingy, cute, precious little twerp.

Gaara orders for them both, using his most stoic and demanding voice. She bets that he learned it from some tightass authoritarian figure with a tiny dick and compensation issues. It seems like the type of person the Kazekage is, anyways. She can only guess, and until she sees him without pants, she can only confirm two of those accusations.

The goat is delicious, a savory, gamey piece of meat that is accented by bright bursts of heat. Chiles open up her pores, and peppery spices numb her tongue. The meat is tender and probably stewed, or pressure cooked, she doesn't know. All she is sure of is that it falls apart with the gentle pressure of her tongue against the bites. She can't get enough of it, and practically inhales it all.

The cactus, on the other hand, is shit.

Ryuishi takes one bite and tries to power through. Usually texture doesn't bother her, but this... this is a serving of crap. Well, it tastes like bile, all bitter and sour at the same time and the feel of it her mouth is like hot slippery snot. Just to be sure, she tries another bite in case the first was just a bad mixture of flavor, but it remains just as horrid and awful.

"Urgh," she says, gathering up her napkin and spitting out the green abortion in her mouth onto the fabric. Strings of viscous saliva trail down from her lips, and she suddenly hates the world. What kind of god allowed this dish to be made into food?

Gaara looks up at her, chipmunk cheeks full of his own lunch, thin lips down turned into a scowl. He chews faster, like he is about to lecture her on how rude she is.

"Gaara, that was literally the worst fucking thing I have ever put in my mouth," she tells him, preemptively defending herself.

He lectures her anyway.

On the third day of her week-long venture back into Suna, Gaara approaches her with a more serious question than the ones that have occasionally cropped up. He is at that age where sometimes the most simple things seem profound, and where those large, esoteric concepts can be explained simply.

So when she mentions toads and salamanders in some strange conversation, the young noble is baffled and silently awed that a creature can live both on land and in water. He tells her that he will ask his uncle just to be sure as if she is lying about amphibians, because the concept is so outlandish to him.

In a memorable conversation about why people smile where she had to explain the instinctive and strange method of baring teeth to show joy, he had asked what happiness was in the most physical terms. She floundered for a bit, before slowly cataloging things like briefly tensed muscles before relaxation, ease of breathing, sensations of stretched cheeks and tranquility of mind. After this, he had just looked blankly at her and said, *Oh, like when you push me on the swings*. The answer was so simple, and she melted like a piece of ice in the sun and hugged him tight for a whole five minutes straight. He had said nothing the whole time, clearly enjoying the contact.

With this history though, most questions are still somewhat unexpected.

A frustrated Gaara attempts to tie the slipknot another time, but his pudgy hands are not yet nimble enough to work with the slender twine. Ryuishi laughs softly under her breath as he glares at it, his sand rustling softly around them in agitation.

"How about you just use mine?" she asks, withholding her genuine mirth for the sake of his incredible pride. For a four year old it is fairly large, and she doesn't want to be the kind of person that would take potshots at it, if only because so many others are already going to.

"Again," he demands for the third time.

She sighs and undoes the twine at the end of her stick, slowly showing him how to loop and twist the string to make the noose. It takes her doing this twice more before she deems his acceptable, and they begin to scope the stones within the city walls, poking around for their prey.

The silence they share is a companionable one, and for a long while the only sounds are the ever present wind and sand scraping against the bluffs and cliff outcroppings of the desert city. The redheaded child doesn't cover his steps like she does, and the soft crunch of his feet is just loud enough to be heard. His bright eyes scan the area, and she relies on his sight to find the chosen targets as she silently sweeps through the sun-baked world. She is the guardian, softly smiling as she trails beside the porcelain prince.

A jerky hand stops her as a single finger points to a creature sunning itself lethargically on stone, basking in warmth. She nods and nudges him, motioning for him to watch her as she moves.

Like a creeping predator she stalks forward, going in from the side so her shadow will not alert it to her presence. Funnily enough, she has killed people like this. But ah, it's whatever. Her stick edges above the target, the long string hovering millimeters above the rocky surface. In one swift motion she slips the noose over its head and pulls up, entangling the thrashing creature so it cannot escape.

Ryuishi lets out a crow of delight as she goes to pick up the chubby lizard, its thick scales sliding roughly in her hand. Its excess skin makes it a struggle, not to mention the surprising amount of muscle it has, but Ryuishi has a past life filled with experience and she wrestles it into submission like a pro. She ends up with the thing held in both hands, twine broken and stick on the ground. She can't identify what species it is, as it looks like some sort of monitor lizard mixed with a gecko. Likely, it isn't anything that existed in her world.

Gaara is approaching with wary interest, and she can feel the fat tub of dry skin wriggle against her, long nails scraping her hand. The angle is off enough that it doesn't do anything, but she reminds herself to be careful.

"That, my little friend," she tells the be-robed child, "Is how you fish for lizards."

He nods in acceptance of the lesson, and she smiles and gently thrusts it out for him to hold, reading the curiosity in his eyes. He awkwardly accepts the beast, pinning its arms to its sides and peering closely at bead-like scales.

"Why does it have those?" he asks.

"Lots of things have scales, but this guy has them mostly for protection. Like armor. They also help keep water in," she answers, curiously registering the blue forked tongue tasting the air.

He shuffles it around and she can see his sand rise up to cradle it so they can both observe. It envelops its limbs and stomach and the creature settles, probably attempting to blend in with the sand.

She peeks into its muddy brown eyes, observing the small flecks of gold in them.

Suddenly it opens its mouth to hiss at her: she backs off, hoping that it doesn't have a spitting reflex. Only, when she does, she finds Gaara picking at the creature's scales with his fingernails, attempting to pry one loose. On reflex alone she acts, grabbing his hand. It says volumes that the only wound she receives is a light scrape as his defense rises to protect him.

The boy looks bewildered by her stern countenance, wide eyed and open mouthed. She might have been a little too fast to disguise as a regular civilian, but she writes it off because she has known mothers who react to misbehaving children with such swiftness that a chunnin would be awed.

"Don't do that," she scolds lightly, "Scales are connected to the skin and it hurts the lizard."

Gaara looks regretful for a moment, and does not go to repeat the action. They spend a little while more playing with their find before letting him scuttle off into the cracks and holes in the stone before he turns back to her, curiosity bright on his face.

"Aneue, what is hurt?" he asks.

"What, you've never felt pain?" she asks, briefly thrown before she remembers, oh, yes. Ultimate defense, sand armor, blah blah blah. That's probably why he was so interested in the scales in the first place.

He shakes his head no, and she thinks about it for a bit before eyeballing him. "Alright, I can show you but you have to promise not to blast me with sand. Or crush me. You have to keep in control, got that? No going crazy."

Gaara nods again, relieved to finally be indoctrinated into this mystery. He probably should have asked Aneue sooner, because she answers almost every one of the questions he asks, unlike Uncle or Father, who tell him he will learn in time.

"Stick out your tongue."

He does, mildly confused for a moment. This seems strange.

"Put your teeth around it."

Again, he follows her orders. She cradles his jaw in her hand, feeling around the smooth shell of sand with agile fingers.

"In advance I apologize, but this is an important lesson."

Then her hand slaps against the shell around his chin and forces his jaw up. His teeth sink slightly into the slimy muscle in his mouth and he tastes blood. A shock goes through him and that thing inside his

stomach protests, bubbling up with anger. He spits out red tinted saliva, growling and whimpering because oh, oh, this is what it is. This is what hurting is like, and he doesn't like it at all. It feels like his body is rebelling against him, and his tongue, it... it aches.

Teary, angry eyes latch onto her because she knew, she knew that it was bad and she did it anyways! She hurt him!

But the look he sees in Aneue's eyes squashes any ideas of retaliation flat. The sun shines behind her, illuminating her body with a golden glow, and the bangs around her face stir in the sand-filled wind. He notices that Aneue is tall, so very tall, and her eyes are empty like the dark between stars at night. She is watching him, measuring something there, and the thing inside his belly *hatehatehates* the void inside the gaze, but does not move against it. He is frozen by intimidation, waiting for the bigger thing to move first.

"It's sucks, I know sweetie," she says, and then she is kneeling and the look is almost gone. Instead she is there again, comforting and sweet as his eyes water and he sniffles. "But that's what happens when somebody gets injured, and what you felt is very, very small compared to what it can be. That's why you don't pick the scales off a lizard, and why you have to be careful with your sand. It can hurt people."

Gaara throws his arms around her and sniffles some more, blinking away the water in his eyes. She was scary and then not, and then she is here and he gets it because pain... pain sucks.

"Yet, hurt teaches us also. It warns us from pushing past to the point of breaking, and sometimes it can motivate us to try harder. Pain is like your sand, Gaara. It can build and destroy. It's all about what we choose to do with it."

He doesn't understand what she is saying, because he is too busy trying to lose himself in the feel of her arms around his back and the smell of flowers, water, and candy that hangs around her like a

comforting blanket. He won't understand it for a few years yet, but he does learn to be a little more careful with his sand that day.

His hand clutches around the sea glass hanging from his neck and she holds him tight, soothing her hands through his hair and rubbing his back.

"Build or destroy, it is all about choice."

She spends the rest of the week with him and this time, when she says she has to leave, he merely snuffles and tell her to hurry, because he knows she will come back.

AN: Aaaaand here's an early chapter! The reason is I'm going camping for a few days out in the national forest, so I won't be here. This also leads into the fact that this month I will be flying away for a week to do some stuff, and the place where I will be has touchy tech so I don't know what is going down then. Also! I got those side stories posted, so shebang!

Also, the thing with Gaara: I don't think he would have transformed just quite yet. There hasn't been assassins out for him yet and he hasn't been betrayed so he doesn't hear 'mothers' voice quite so clearly. It's there, but faded. Also, if you read, he does get pissed, but Gaara is four and Ryushi is watching him the same way she watched opponents in the war. She can be intimidating, especially to a barely trained child, and really, he like her and he did ask for it.

Thanks to all my readers, reviewers, followers and favoriters. I like you. You're alright.

The biggest thanks to my beta Enbi, who got this to me early! YAY!. Thank her!

Question time, this one's a hypothetical: When she is older (22-24), Ryuishi somehow gets black out drunk. What does she

wake up to find she has done the night before?

Meeting a Fanatic

I do not own Naruto.

Watanabe Ryuishi felt that of all the things she worried about, perhaps she should have worried about the fanaticism inside the Mumei ranks just a little bit more.

As soft, petite hands clasps hers and adoring eyes stare at her, she thought that maybe this could have been planned out a little better. This time with a background check, or a substance abuse test, or fucking something.

The plan had been simple, make contact with the Mumei inside Konoha. Usually it didn't take much, and her identity was easily proven. No one else in this planet had a tattoo quite like hers, because body art hadn't come quite that far in this world. Also, the bone and bead hair stick Hanako gifted was intricately carved in such a way that it was impossible to duplicate. Not to mention her peculiar chakra or weapon. These were all unique features that belonged to her idolized persona, the Lucky Dragon.

The problem wasn't proving her identity, or even finding the Mumei reported to be in the city. She had checked with Kagami last time they had met to get the name and appearance. The problem wasn't even getting inside the city, because she had just used a different river under the cover of night. No, the trouble had come once the Okiya girl had dragged her inside and seen the tattoo and the hair pin. It had come once she was certain that the 'Rakki Ryuu' was actually standing in front of her.

Shimmery blue eyes the color of aquamarines drink in her features with an intensity that is completely insane, while pale-skinned fingers ran gently down her arms, her hands, and her fingers.

"You! You, it's you! You-" a charming, birdlike voice chants quietly as the owner continues to invade her personal space.

"Uhhhhh," Ryuishi lets out, squinting at the woman in front of her. She is clearly an adult, albeit a cute, petite adult, but she was at least twenty. Probably. Maybe? She had glossy, sleek blue-black hair and creamy skin, not to mention a bust that was at least a C-cup. The woman had a petite frame which was wrapped delicately in light blue silk, and was truly beautiful to look at. If not for the insane, sycophantic muttering under her breath, the missing nin might have even tried to make a pass, but the awe and devotion in her eyes is unsettling. It's fervent, and kinda crazy.

"Misaki?" Ryuishi asks, hoping that this was the contact and not some tweaker. It looks like her, sounds like her, and this was the brothel listed. It's just that Kagami never mentioned intense and complete fangirling.

Pale blue eyes light up at the name, and small hands clasp around hers as the woman goes to her knees, staring at her as if she hung the stars.

" *You said my name,*" she whispers.

Ryuishi honestly feels really, truly uncomfortable. For the first time in a while she can feel heat begin to travel up her neck and settle on her cheeks, a blush ruining her perfectly stoic face. Hot damn, she is embarrassed. Like, really bad.

Honestly, she isn't that great. Truly, she is a shit person. A part of her wants to blurt that out to the woman and confess the load of weird and terrible things she has done. Just the other day she had shoved an old man out of her way in a mad dash for the last barbecued squid at a kebab joint, and sometimes she made fun of birds. Okay, she made fun of birds a lot, but in her defense they were stupid and loud and she hated them.

Ryuishi stand uncomfortably stiff, frozen in place in the wooden room. Since she didn't cause the weird atmosphere, she had no idea what to do. She carefully observes the tatami mats behind Misaki's head. They are clean and tightly woven, showing only the wear of frequent use and time. They are kept pretty well and are probably cleaned every week. That's nice, at least the brothel is clean.

"You... you chose me to assist you," the woman continues, "I am so very honored. To have you in my home is a blessing."

"Uhhh," she states again. Honestly, how is she supposed to reply to that?

"To think, the Lucky Dragon, she who guided us, is here before me."

The flush blooms higher on her face and she can feel her ears burning. Seriously, what the fuck? Just how many titles did she have? This is goddamn ridiculous.

"And to be so young! The rumors were true! With blushing cheeks and such strong, capable hands-"

"Misaki," Ryuishi cuts in, and woah, did her voice just crack? "I am honored and pleased to meet you, but really, I'm just a person."

The woman flashes her a smile that can send soldiers to war and runs her hand down the length of Ryuishi's arm, which makes her heated face burn even more. Sweet mother Mary on a Harley, this woman was something else.

"So humble and sweet," she coos, and oh, how the tables have turned. Is this what Naruto and Gaara feel like when she fawns over them? Well, not likely, because they usually soak it up like no one's business, but still.

Ryuishi just isn't good with compliments. She doesn't like them aimed at her when they're actually serious, because they make her feel awful and dirty and gross. She's certainly vain enough that if

someone compliments her hair or tells her she has a rockin' body she can accept it, but otherwise, they disquiet her.

It is another one of those things, she supposes. One of those conflicting parts of her that knows she isn't a crap person, and yet is. A part of her that loves attention and praise, but also hates it. The same part of her that loves to flirt, but runs and hides when seriously being hit on. So meeting this type of follower really threw her. She had expected to walk in here, confident and in control. That graceful and powerful person she was always aiming to be. Instead she feels every one of her body's fifteen (nearly sixteen) years of life. All that embarrassment and awkwardness bound in growing skin.

An errant instinct pops up inside of her, a piece of her given life through multiple psychotic breaks and living life as a soldier-for-hire. It whispers quietly, an insidious hiss in the back of her head. If she scares Misaki, maybe hurts her a bit, then things would be better. She can choke the breath out of her pretty pale neck until she learns to stop this, or give her a scar to match the one on Ryuishi's own neck. Curiously enough, it sounds a bit like Orochimaru.

How about we not do that, she thinks flippantly, pushing the idea into nonexistence.

Ryuishi goes to kneel in front of the starstruck woman. Outside the doors she can hear the quiet, stifled breaths of the working girls pressed close to the paper screens, desperately listening in to this newest drama. She wants to roll her eyes, she had forgotten how gossip spread inside the Okiya. Tentatively, she turns her calloused hands inside the woman's, gripping her fingers in hers. She digs up some courage from the depths of her being and meets those piercing eyes head on.

"Misaki-san, do you agree to what I am asking?"

"I would do anything for you, anything at all," she whispers.

"So you agree to house me, hide me, and lend me your things when I am in need? To care for those I ask you to?"

"Yes, of course-"

"You agree to this, knowing that no harm will come to you if you do not. Knowing that if we are caught, they will take everything from you? That Konoha will silence your voice and most likely take your life?"

"Anything for you," she says, and when Ryuishi measures her words, she finds nothing but truth. The devotion inside of this stranger is terrifying, and she feels it down to her bones. It is dangerous and wholehearted, the kind of mindless faith that set her old world on fire. The feeling of responsibility clutches at her and she wants to panic, but she forces a smile on her face anyway.

"Thank you, Misaki. I will make sure your services are well compensated."

Hands grip tight and suddenly the ex-Mist ninja is engulfed inside an embrace, pulled face first into a shuddering chest, and oh sweet lord of the heavens, help her. She is too hormonal for this. Are fear boners even a thing? She fucking hates being a teenager again. Oh well, at least she can count on Misaki keeping her secrets. There is little room for betrayal with this absurd level of loyalty.

The next morning, Ryuishi wakes up to the harsh glint of sunlight and entire Okiya's worth of people peeping on her from around the corner of her doorway. Sleeping on a futon had been nostalgic, even if this entire district was five hundred times cleaner and better kept than Kiri's red light. She even got her own room out of the deal, but she isn't sure if Misaki did it because she had room to spare, or it was because she was who she was.

Blinking past her sleepy haze, her improved hearing catches a shushed round of giggles and whispers while silky hair flashes

around the corner of a closed sliding door. It says something about her that her first instinct is to demolish the whole room and kill the gigglers, but she doesn't really care what. Instead, she leans forward into a sitting position while somebody outside coos.

"H'llo?" she calls out groggily, "Can I help you?" She cringes because her husky voice is laced with tiredness and curiosity.

More giggling answers her a moment before a quiet 'shush' settles them down. As if on cue, the screen door slides open to reveal Misaki, bright-eyed and beautiful, surrounded by an assortment of men and women in all shapes, sizes and colors. All of whom are smiling and happy, tittering among themselves as they cast glances her way. She has no idea what they have been told about their new guest, but they look very glad to see her.

It is way too early for this shit.

Misaki leans forward to greet her in a sweeping bow from her position in seiza, and Ryuishi grumpily rubs at her eyes, trying to smear the sleep right out of them. She almost misses the ways she would wake up to Kisame's reflective eyes staring down at her, judging her from her place curled into Zabuza's side. It seems much more preferable to this... good cheer, or whatever the hell this is.

"Good morning, Ryuu-hime. This one hopes you have rested well."

"Mornin', Misaki-san," she answers.

The people behind her burst into noise again, cooing over the politeness and respect she has shown through her choice of suffix, but it goes over her head this early in the morning. What the fuck is so special about common decency? She just thinks-wait, did that fucker just call her princess? Oh, come *on* !

"Breakfast is ready and the baths are drawn. Whichever you choose, we are here to assist."

"No, really, it's fuckin' fine. I can do those by myself-"

"I insist, Ryuu-hime. After the the amount you donated last night, we have time to spare!"

Internally, Ryuishi curses herself. If she had fucking known that the woman was going to try this shit, she might not have done it. Then again, looking at the delighted faces of the workers, she might have. Misaki must have spread the wealth, and then let it known who had handed it over, because the crowd is practically ready to jump her. She doesn't know who most of them are, but she can see from dangling fish-bone jewelry and feather braids that a few probably have an inkling to who she is, while the others simply know her as the girl who gave them money and time off.

She is genuinely unsettled. They all look like they want to consume her. Or molest her. Or something else unpleasant. Has she... has she gotten some sort of fan-club? This is scary.

Yet, she has been traveling, and she would face worse for the privilege of being clean. It's not that she has ever particularly modest anyway. So what if they see what if they see her naked? She flashed her tits at ANBU for Christ's sake, and it's not like these people haven't seen the goods on a hundred different bodies before her.

"Bath," she decides out loud, stretching out her arms above her head with a yawn. It's only when three dispatch from the flock like murderous, beautiful birds does she begin to doubt.

Ryuishi is herded through the multiple story building in a whirl of colorful silks and groping hands that tear at her clothes. She isn't shy, but she is bewildered as hell. She is a fucking A-ranked missing nin, but they are treating her like a doll as they help her strip and push items at her.

"Try this cream, it makes for such smooth legs!" one says, shoving a pot at her as she rinses.

"Such long, beautiful hair! I can't wait to see it down," another purrs.

"Look at how muscled you are! You must be so strong!" a different person tells her as someone else coats her hair in a pungent soap.

"What a beautiful mark. It's true, it really does go all the way to her cute little-"

"Misaki, *shit!* " Ryuishi yelps, batting the wandering hand away from her ass.

She doesn't feel ashamed or anything. It's just, well, she's used to spending most of her time alone or focused on another person. No one is with her when she travels, or when she is at home. With Naruto and Gaara, she is completely in control of the situation. She is used to isolation and quiet. Now she is drowning in positive attention, desperately trying to stay afloat as wave after wave crashes over her. She is a murderer and a sarcastic asshole and an all-around degenerate thug. This kind of stuff is out of her comfort zone.

The whirlwind continues, and she is cleaned and pampered till she shines, and then they continue. Someone new is fitting a sultry looking kimono around her, all flowing black fabric and grey smoke patterns. Misaki is exclaiming something as she combs through her hair, and somebody else is contouring her face and coloring her eyes.

Ryuishi is fairly certain she has gone into shock. She hasn't worn a proper robe since she left the Okiya and enrolled in the Academy. It brings back memories of her old home, the smell of incense and stale sex in the brothel. The stench of rot and decay outside the windows and the endless sea of fog through the dirty streets. For a moment Keiko's delicate, rounded face smiles at her through her memories, before it is replaced with the smashed mess she had come home to find. Staring at herself in the mirror as the sex workers flutter around her, she wonders what her birth giver would have had to say about the unrecognizable woman in her reflection.

She sucks in a breath as the image registers.

They have contoured her face in such a way that her coal eyes look wider, lined with a lighter color underneath. They look half lidded and sultry as they gaze back from the silvery surface, the bridge of her nose narrower and cuter instead of rounded. She has cheekbones that have appeared from nowhere and a jawline like woah. Her plump lips are colored softly, and there is a ribbon tied around her neck like a choker, hiding the scar underneath. Her ridiculously long hair is silky and straightened out, a curtain of midnight parted in the middle and fluttering loose down around her hips.

Ryuishi is confident in her body, and knows that when she feels the need, her skill with makeup can make her pretty to others as well. It's just that, it's nowhere near this level of skill. She looks like herself, but the emphasis is on other features than what she would choose. She is just so subtly off that she is almost unrecognizable. It isn't the rough, yanki look she usually rocks. It's elegant and natural, only it's totally not. She look like... well, not really herself, but still herself?

"Did you guys do fucking magic?" she blurts, and she hears titters around her.

This... this is perfect. It's like she is hidden in plain sight, only *better* . She feels like a movie star, only she looks like a next level hooker, the kind of escort you would find in some jumped up noble's house. Even Orochimaru, with his photographic memory, would have trouble picking her out.

She is a pretty whore, hidden among pretty whores.

She smiles and laughs, and the room full of people look delighted. She hugs everybody that helped her in this transformation, and then some. Even if they are a bit overzealous, these people are magicians and professionals. She thanks every one of them repeatedly, and they glow under her praise. Then she hides a truly amazing amount of weapons and tidbits on her person and sweeps out the door, blending in with the streets of people. There is a little of

bundle of energy she needs to visit, and now she can do it where everybody can see.

Who would equate Watanabe Ryuishi, the dangerous missing nin, with this soft young harlot?

Ryuishi walks right up to the jinchuuriki's worn apartment building, and the only second glances she receives are to gauge her appearance. She looks like she belongs, like she is Fire Country born and bred in this disguise, and it makes her want to laugh. She is hiding in another skin, right beneath the law's nose. Suck it, Konoha.

The steps to the door creak beneath her weight, and the handrail is covered in peeling paint as she ascends, but it seems like nothing can ruin her good mood right now. When she reaches his door, she raps on it sharply, and a sky blue eye peeks out.

"Whaddya want?" it asks.

She smiles, a crooked snaggletooth smirk with too much joy, and looks down at him. He squints harder, like he thinks he should know who she is but can't quite remember.

"That's no way to fucking greet someone, sunshine."

The door closes, and she can hear crashing on the other side, the clattering of a deadbolt and the clink of a small chain. It only takes a moment for the passageway to open up again, and she sees him in full. A grin is stretching across his face, his gap-toothed smile shining like a lantern in the night. Something she didn't know was there eases in her chest.

The boy is safe, and she can sense no guards. They never discovered why she was here last time.

"Nee-chan!" he shouts, and her robed legs are squished tight as he attempts to bowl her over in his enthusiasm, clutching her to him.

She laughs, and the sound is airy to her own ears.

This brat, this beautiful little brat.

Bending at the waist, she fits her hands under his arms and picks him up, embracing him for real as she steps inside the apartment, shutting the door with a sandaled foot.

"Hey there, kiddo," she whispers, feeling him wrap her arms around her neck. The smell of cheap ramen and green leaves rustling in warm wind fills her nose as she hold him close.

"Did you take out the trash? Was it hard? I bet you did a great job, because now you're all pretty and your clothes are nice and-"

The sound of her laughter washes over him, and Naruto looks up from her shoulder, fidgeting in her arms. He didn't know if she would come back, because she was so... so scary last time he saw her. He couldn't see past everybody's legs, but she saw something and then she had to go and he had to play Uno all by himself, and what if she had gotten hurt-?

She did come back though, and now he was safe in her arms. Her cool skin felt nice, and her pretty hair was all over and she smells good.

He missed her.

"What happened, dattebayo?" he demands, detaching from her for a moment.

"I told you, I had to take care of some garbage. That's my job, so sometimes I'll have to leave and do that."

"But you'll come back?"

"I'll try to. Sometimes it might take longer than others, but I will continue to try and get back."

"You better," he tells her seriously. She smiles again.

He nods gravely, slamming his fist into his hand. "It's like Jiji said. Sometimes pets wander off. Garbage fairies and cats."

And just like that, the two of them are picking up right where they left off, like she never left in the first place.

Naruto drags her to the back room to show off his paint collection and she determinedly washes the empty cups and bowls littered around his house, taking his clothes to be washed. He too, seems to be in that question asking phase, and trails behind her in the apartment, yammering away.

"Why are you dressed so nice?" he asks while she separates the colors from the whites.

"Because I feel like it."

"Why is your face funny?" he queries again.

"Well that's fuckin' rude, sunshine."

"Your face is rude."

"Aaand guess who can fold his own clothes now?"

"I LIED!" he shouts, wriggling frantically on top of the dryer, "Your face is normal and polite!"

"Too late. The damage is done," she tells him dramatically, shoving him gently so he collapses into a heap on the metal.

"Nee-san!" he protests.

"Nope, too late. You made your bed, now lie in it."

"But... you made my bed," he says, head cocked to the side, with confusion that is, quite frankly, fucking adorable.

Ryuishi sighs and rolls her eyes, but the smile doesn't drop. It's good to be back.

An: Uhhh... I think this chapter started a bit rough but got better! Anyway, hooray for subtle disguises and hiding in plain sight! Now we get to see what canon characters interact with sex workers! Also, we get Ryuishi having the ability to troll around without on sight recognition. There are problems with it, of course, but we will see...

Thanks to my lurkers, favoriters, followers and reviewers! You guys deserve wonderful candy.

Thank to my beta enbi, who is super awesome!

Question: This one is a bit of a doozy. Sorry. Sticking with fanfiction's sometimes weird AU themes, if the characters were in a alpha/beta/omega based universe, who would be what and why?

Meeting the Safe House

I do not own Naruto

Naruto runs around like a headless chicken, going on like some sort of loud, particularly hyperactive rooster. Watching him bounce around is exhausting, and she briefly wonders if she has ever had that much energy in her life. He fills up the room with his own infectious energy, charming the more wary viewers with sunshine smiles and pure strength of will alone. Beside her, Misaki and a few of the higher-earning Okiya workers stare on with trepidation.

"They say he is a demon," Misaki whispers under her breath, blue eyes darting to the teenager who is draped across the floor.

Misaki looks collected and professional from her seiza, a practiced appearance that is both lovely and inviting. She probably spent her life perfecting it, turning the image into a selling point for patrons. Ryuishi, on the other hand, is sprawled out. She doesn't look very dignified, but she supposes that her aura must ooze something, because no one has commented on her stretched limbs lying about. She forgot how restricting kimono were, and how heavily layered. She has already pulled the fabric tight and bunched in areas, while letting it pool loosely in others.

She casts her loaded, lazy gaze on the woman. "They called me a demon," she returns quietly.

Misaki glances at her and softens. "He carries a great evil," the prostitute fires back.

"As do we all," Ryuishi reminds her, draped over the tatami mats like a snake sunning itself. "I give my love to everything, Misaki. The Odayaka Oni and Chujitsuna Same were right bastards, but they

saved my life countless times. There is the capacity to do good and bad in all of us."

Misaki breathes in, her clear blue eyes following the rambunctious child as he chases his brand new ball across the room, stopping only to flash a blindingly bright smile at Ryuishi before throwing it again. He looks so... well, normal. He is warm and gleeful, a shimmering little boy bubbling over with happiness. If she hadn't known about the child's status as village pariah, she could imagine him on any playground or schoolyard.

"You retain the right to say no, but remember that he is like us. He has no family, no friends, and he is alone. The people scorn him for the station of his birth and situations he cannot help," Ryuishi says, casting her eyes around the room, letting her voice carry. A few others hear and look less scared and more skeptical, reading the message underneath her words. *He is Mumei in all but name*, it says, *a helpless child left to his fate* .

"I mean, don't get me wrong, either. He is a one hell of a brat as well and is ungodly loud and energetic, but he can't have me looking after him all the fuckin' time. This is your choice, all I'm asking is that you give him a chance."

Misaki smiles and looks at her from the corner of her eyes, reading the fondness in the teasing words, the light in her eyes. Then her gaze slides back to the boy, who has engaged a wary worker into listening to a tale of the time his nee-san taught him how to stretch, and would the man like to see?

She thinks that they never really stood a chance at saying no. Not when it Was Rakki Ryu who was asking, not when the proclaimed devil's spawn was such a bright light for everyone in the Okiya. Children weren't often kept in their line of business, and the brothel showed that. Already she could see the disquieted, unsettled gaze of her workers turning into a sort of possessive yearning.

The boy is young enough to be raised, and severely lacking in physical affection. He responds to every hesitant kind word and apprehensive nod with genuine delight. These childless people, working in such a scorned profession, they are already empathizing. They know how cruel people can be; their job lets them see the darker sides of everyone who walks through the door. Misaki cannot name how many of her employees were thrust into this life without choice, who carried on because there was, until recently, no other choice. Some, like herself, chose it, but even they are not immune to the siren song of positive attention and unjudging affection.

The Lucky Dragon certainly is a miracle worker, to bring in such an unwanted surprise and have it turn out so well. She thinks that by the end of the week, the boy will become a pampered child with more nee-sans and nii-sans than he can count. It is merely strange to her that the legendary figure wishes to be among their number.

"Does he know?" she asks, and the teenager looks at her with a raised brow.

"Fuck that. I don't want him to know."

"But you are-"

"A person, Misaki. I'm just a person," Ryuishi answers, not unkindly.

The petite woman bows her head and bites her lip. She has no idea why she does not want the child to know about who she really is, or why she brought him in the first place. She doesn't even really understand why she insists on being treated so normally either, balking and flushing at compliments and praise. Misaki thinks that, perhaps, she should just let this one slide. The traits are endearing and do nothing to sway her loyalty, except to maybe fan it to greater heights.

Inside of herself, she screeches at what a cute girl the Lucky Dragon turned out to be, and gushes about how strong and capable she is. She got to play with Rakki Ryuu's hair, and she even saw her butt!

The Rakki Ryuu wanted her help and sought her out. This precious baby had changed everything, and then brought her another small child as well. There was nothing but aesthetically pleasing features on that boy, and the duo looked so cute rolling the ball on the floor. Imagine, such an adorable scene, here in her Okiya! Looking around at the covetous faces of the others, she can tell they think the same.

There will be a safe place for the child here when the Rakki Ryuu is away. He is too bright of a light, too warm of a fire, to be left alone. If he seeks them out, they will not shun him, but nor will they force themselves into his life. He will not be one of them, but he will be theirs.

Misaki would do anything for the Lucky Dragon.

Ryuishi can spot the exact moment Misaki makes up her mind, and takes a moment to congratulate herself. As much as the brothel's fanaticism disquieted her, it did have its uses. A few hours ago, the Okiya had been deathly quiet when she swept in with Naruto at her side. She could see scorn and anger at the boy, and bewilderment aimed at her. Now the hate was being replaced with caution and even hesitant evaluation.

She knew for a fact that most people avoided Naruto on hearsay alone, and that even the Mumei would be trepidatious to look past what he held. By thrusting the cheerful, attention-grabbing child right into their faces with no warning and subtly reminding them all of their own status in the eyes of others, she had forced them to rethink their stern positions and opinions, to look past the rumors. Their own appointed leader was touted as a demon and a monster, and they themselves were often scorned as trash. This little boy was carrying a heavy weight, one that he had no idea existed, and now, they had to see what he really was: just a person. Just a little boy.

"Nee-san! Nee-san! That guy with the cool bracelet over there said that Chujitsuna Same was blue! Is that true?!" the brat demands obnoxiously, crawling over her to slump across her back. She casts

an eye over to the man Naruto had been showing off to, noting the pleased look he casts at the bracer on his arm.

"Well, he's more of a blue-grey if you ask me," she drawls out.

Naruto gasps. "That's so weird!" he exclaims, hands burying themselves into the fabric of her robe.

"Is it?" she asks, tilting her head to the side. "I mean, you're all peachy tan, and I'm more of a beige tan. Misaki-san is smooth, creamy white. People come in all sorts of colors. So what?"

The ball of energy looks like she has just told him the world's biggest secret and his mouth hangs open slightly. His blue eyes go big, and the woman besides her preens under the compliment to her complexion.

"You're right," he whispers, stunned.

She rolls her eyes. *Kids.*

"What happened to your ball?" she questions him curiously.

Naruto rudely points a finger to a plump brunette off to the side, his face serious. The woman looks a little like reality has turned on its head, and in her hands is the toy in question.

"She has it, because she looked angry, so I said she could play with it and not be angry, even though you gave it to me. Because I have Uno at home, and there are no balls to play with here."

Somebody in the corner snorts, and she hears a muted 'more balls than you can imagine, kid.' The adults in the room attempt to stifle laughter as one, shoulders shaking. A few leave the room, but Naruto continues on, oblivious.

Ryuishi can't help the smirk that grows on her face.

That night, after Sunshine has been taken back and tucked into bed, Ryuishi takes a second to appreciate how far she has come.

As she brushes a stray lock of hair off of his forehead, she thinks about how a few years ago, she was out of control. Even before the burning of Kiri, she had been a hot mess, only glued together by her boys. The pieces of herself had been coming undone, and it was one thing after another. Trauma after trauma in the dark streets of Kiri and on the battlefield had pulled her into a spiralling wreckage of the person she had been in a past life.

She was manic and depressive, hitting moods like light switches, riding an uncontrollable wave of mixed up personalities and dark thoughts. The haunting, lingering guilt ate at her, as if she was somehow at fault for dying and leaving her family. As if she had the power to change the orphans and oppressive systems right then and there, from the moment of her birth. It had spiraled further, and sometimes she thought she was to blame for being attacked when she was a child, or that she was the one who should have saved the school children. Then the war had happened, and she was holding on to sanity by a shoestring.

The ruthless thing that had been born on the bloody frontlines was a manifestation of her anger and cruelty. Admittedly, it was still there, humming quietly in the depths of her heart, but it only cried out when she prodded at it.

Now though, now she was something she could recognize again. She wasn't the same as she was in her past life, not exactly, and the mental illness and quiet grief still lingered, but she was better. She could be happy again, smile and be silly just for the sake of it. She got to indulge her whims, and her personalities were not such tangled mess. She was capable of finding joy in life again. Every week she would take the opalescent spherical pills Orochimaru had crafted for her. Every day she got to be a person without hallucinations and a semblance of stability.

There was never going to be a point of fully healed, and she accepted it. Things just didn't work that way. There was always going to be the reeking stench of eternity curling tight inside her soul. The tendrils of Void inside her would never go away. She still missed her family, and the portraits of them hanging in her house never failed to send a spear through her heart. Nightmares and flashbacks were things that she would have to learn to live with, just like all the other pieces of herself, and her budding god-complex was something she would have to carefully watch before it got out of hand. There was always shit, there was always going to be shit.

Sometimes though, she thinks, carding her hands through Naruto's hair, just finding a moment of peace is enough.

Other times, her brain supplies as the room around her spins, finding a moment of peace is eclipsed by the temptation of getting mildly intoxicated with a bunch of hookers .

It should probably be noted that nobody had the intention of getting her drunk, and the night had just kind of tumbled in that direction. It was actually just another work night for most of them-even though they had the choice not to due to her patronage, it seemed like a few were working on a rainy day fund.

So when Misaki had offered her a shot of sake to go with the meal Ryuishi had helped cook, she had smiled and accepted. Then there was one to go with dessert. And then one for the opening. And then another for a toast to the awesome company. She found she didn't even like the taste of it, or the burning sensation that bloomed in her veins when she consumed it. It was less about enjoying the booze and more about temporarily softening the edges of reality.

Was she drinking to numb herself or some shit? Not really. It was just hella rude to turn away free booze, and she might not be the politest person, but she wasn't a stone cold bitch either. Well, she could be, but whatever. That wasn't the point.

It had gone on like that until she was pleasantly buzzed, her head softly swimming in a pleasant dizziness. She knew when to stop herself, if only because a hangover and Naruto sounded like an awful equation that ended in manslaughter of a child. The others seemed to be in the same boat as her and they all were quietly discussing very important matters in the greeting room of the Okiya.

"Did he really find you in a dumpster?" the man with the bracer Naruto was admiring earlier asks.

"Unfortunately, yes. I planned to come here last time, but I slipped up and was noticed," she states.

Misaki nods her head sagely and comments, "So that's why the lookout alarms went off..."

Ryuishi bobs her head. "I done fucked up. We all make mistakes."

"That's a strange mistake to make," replies another.

"Look, it isn't that strange to end up in the dumpster. Quit bustin' my balls."

Misaki, slowly coming to terms that the deity she worships may be more human than presumed, snickers. "I don't remember seeing any of those in the bath," she says primly, sipping the warm, clear liquor in her saucer.

Ryuishi makes a flippant gesture with her hand and snorts, going back to the platter of natural goodies in her hands. She has a taste for good food these days, something that is a surprising side effect of her past life and the poor nutrition of Kiri. Admittedly, she might even be a bit neurotic about it. Fresh fruits and vegetables were hard to come by in Mist, and rotted fast in the moist air. Everything but the fish was usually soured in some way, and even the aquatic specimens were lacking.

As she pops a sliver of peach into her mouth, she savors the tang of the juice coating her tongue. Food is one of those things you never really miss until it's gone-being a bit of a foodie in her past life and then suddenly being hurtled into near starvation-like conditions was hard. But even then, she had it better than most, living in Kagami's high-end brothel.

Most days, when she isn't forgetting her meals or subsisting off of foraged goods, she enjoys the amount of produce this world has to offer. The Columbian exchange didn't happen here, but surprisingly enough, there is a huge diversity of things grown on the continent, and she loves them all. Her favorite food still remains Poke, though. There's something about fatty raw fish and seaweed mixed with salt and chiles that really speaks to her. Or maybe it just reminds her of her mother and old family. Whatever, she's only knows she needs to make some when she gets back home. Maybe if she walks out far enough she can get some yellow fin. Then again, what the fuck is she going to do with that big of a fish? That would make a truly absurd amount of Poke. Maybe if she dries it, or freezes it? No, but it's better fresh...

Ryuishi's thoughts are cut off by a low chuckle from the entrance to the side of them and the sharp smell of cigarette smoke lingering faintly on the customer that just walked in. Dark eyes take in a scraggly teenager with scruffy hair and the barest hints of a chinstrap. He takes in the faces around the table with familiarity, and she can see him cataloging the placement of things in the room. It is only with years of experience does she squash the urge to show any outward signs of recognition.

He is a shinobi.

The way he carries himself is smooth and powerful, confident in the damage he can do to another. There are no scars like she has, but Konoha has always had better healthcare than Kiri, and she never had a chance to get to a healer quickly enough to stop most of them from healing poorly anyway. There is a smoky intelligence in his gaze, smothered by a rebellious gleam.

Sarutobi Asuma, son of the Third Hokage, stands in the doorway of the brothel in a worn leather jacket, looking like a pop-punk thug.

If she was less buzzed, she is certain that her heart would be hammering in her chest. As it is, she just reminds herself that right now, she is playing the part of whore among whores.

"Ah, Sarutobi-san!" Misaki sings out in greeting, "Back to visit?"

The others around the table smile and don't give any hints that they are hiding a menace among them. She had almost forgotten what good actors sex workers have to be, always pretending their client is the light of their world and faking orgasms and whatnot. *Ha*.

"Just dropped by for the lovely company. Nothing too much," he answers. Someone has gotten up to help him slip out of his coat, and the rest of them are shuffling around the table to make room.

"The sake tonight is particularly free-flowing, and you are always welcome!" the woman replies.

Ryuishi wants to snort. For somebody with a father as rich as his, of course the door will always be open. She knew Asuma and his father had problems, but to witness how blatant it is up close is different. Daddy dearest must have really been a dick to push his honorable son right into the arms of the seedy red light. Or is the teenager just on his 'you don't own me' kick? Doesn't he join some monk order something? The Twelve Guardians? God, this is *great*. The kid is practically royalty, and he's slummin' it with hookers.

Not that it matters. There are good people she has met that have been hookers. Some of the best people.

She idly slips another slice of cool fruit into her mouth, appreciating the crispness of the pear absentmindedly. Asuma seats himself on the corner right next to where she is laid out. He looks at her, and she can feel his eyes skimming over the dip in her waist and the

curve of her hip. His gaze is appraising, and she wishes she hadn't let the robe slip off her shoulder now.

"Hello, haven't seen you before," he greets, and she smiles in what she hopes is a demure way. Never really had to practice demure before, and it probably comes off as a bit sassy. Maybe even bitchy. But hopefully not crazy.

"Never seen you either," she replies awkwardly.

Misaki smiles at them both, glossing over the tension like a pro. "Oh, how rude of me!" she says, "Sayuri is visiting the village to spread news of her Mizuage ceremony."

It's clever on Misaki's part. A lot of the higher class working girls will indeed do just that, travelling around from village to village to gain more bidders on their 'graduation' from Maiko. They can travel around for years, building up interest in themselves to raise the bidding higher, carefully cultivating relationships for monetary gain. She just wishes that she didn't have another name to remember, and also that Misaki hadn't implied that she was looking for people to buy her virginity. Is she even a virgin anymore? There was a whole past life worth of fucking to be considered, and that babe in Iwa and her had gotten pretty friendly. Technically it wasn't sex, but it sure and the hell wasn't proper. It brings up the age old question: does oral count?

"How intriguing. I'm sure you will set records," he compliments her, and that's a lie. She might look pretty sweet in this get up, but the fact remains that for all her confidence, she is a little too muscular to be the type of beautiful that is sought after. Not to mention her all around shitty personality. Briefly, she is glad that long robes can hide her physique and personalities can be faked.

"I aim to be the best in my craft," she answers haughtily, which is a lie as well. She is more than fine with mediocrity.

Misaki gets a glint in her eye, like she has happened on a tasty bit of gossip. It sets Ryuishi's alarms off. "We were just discussing what she hoped to find in a potential danna. What was it again? A *demon* in the sheets or a *loyal* lover who faithfully serves as well as receives?"

Ryuishi fights the urge to choke on the pear slice. *What* . Did-? Was Misaki really implying that she and... Was she being shipped? Were people shipping her with her unit?! Is her face blushing? Goddamn it, Misaki!

"I always found that a balance between the two was best," Asuma comments lightly, as if this is a common discussion. She supposes that for hookers it just might be.

"I hope to be blessed with someone who knows how to keep it *professional* . It is just a job after all," she states, impressed with her own composure. She hopes Misaki gets the message.

"Clinginess can be a problem," the other woman acquiesces, "Perhaps someone younger?"

Ryuishi does not miss the way her eyes dart to the newcomer. Asuma does not miss it either. His grin is roguish and exasperating.

"Young, but not inexperienced is not bad either. It's nice to have somebody to show you the ropes."

Ryuishi wants to scream. What has her life become? "Ah, but with the younger ones there always seems to be an confidence that may not be deserved." she retaliates. Seriously, fuck that arrogant asshole. But not like that.

"That is true," he gives, a spark in his eyes, "But others have just enough practice under their belt to know what their doing, and the eagerness to please."

"Oh, that is most definitely true," Misaki pipes in, "But it is important that they know what to do."

"I'll take your word on it, Misaki-san. You are the one with the most experience after all," Ryuishi states, attempting to bow out of the conversation.

"I agree with Sayuri, you are the best teacher I've had in this area. Any advice you have to give would be much appreciated."

"I think that whatever it comes down to, whoever wins Sayuri's first night will be happy indeed."

"I'm sure they will," he states, meeting her eyes with meaning. Seriously, what a *punk* . If she wasn't undercover she might fight him on principle.

What she doesn't admit to herself is that she is just bad at these type of things, and that she really doesn't dislike the man at all. He seems pretty chill, it's just that she is easily flustered with positive attention. When she gets flustered, she gets defensive. When she gets defensive, she gets confrontational. When she gets confrontational, well, usually there's fighting involved. Only she can't this time, because she apparently is a visiting sex worker looking to sell her virginity, and she doubts many of those know how to kill somebody with a celery stick. There's got to be at least one other person though, right? It's not too weird, yeah?

She moves her eyes away from the vegetable and mourns the loss of her good times, setting herself to play entertainer to Asuma. What a bummer.

It all ends well though, and Asuma eventually departs with the image of a mildly tsundere hooker planted firmly in his head. She knows this because as the night wore on, he started losing interest in the conversation, his intelligent gaze turned elsewhere, convinced he had her figured out.

It's easier that way, she supposes, to present a slightly thought out persona, but ultimately shallow personality. To him, Sayuri is a greedy and naive girl riding her skills as far as they will get her who entertained him only because it was polite, but was more interested in his family money than him. It is not an uncommon circumstance for sex workers, and he writes her off as a known variable.

Ryuishi is fine with this.

She spend her next few days covertly spending time with Naruto, fostering the budding bond between them. It is easy to do, to treat him like the little sibling she misses so much. Maybe they don't share much, but their brilliant smiles are so similar. They both have that thirst for life, that flair for charming people. As much as she cares for him as himself, the way she can always see her sister inside of him makes her chest ache in a way that is both good and bad. It does makes it simpler to care for him, even if it is unfair to project the image of another onto him.

She swallows down her angst and chides herself for letting her hormones run rampant. Seriously, she like 30-40 something mentally. Enough is enough. She rolls her eyes at her own thoughts and focuses on the way Naruto is picking at something on the ground.

"What is it?" she asks.

"A bug."

"What kind of bug?"

"I don't know, look!"

The young boy shoves his palm under her nose and she screeches, slapping his palm away from her face at lightning speed.

The large, black-shelled Kabuto beetle soars away into the underbrush.

"Ow! What the fuck, nee-san?"

She doesn't even register that Naruto has just cursed, writing it off as something else. It really shouldn't even come as a surprise. She is one of his role models, after all. Instead she focuses on her hammering heart, clutching at her chest and glaring at him.

"What the fuck is right sunshine! Why the hell would you pick that up?"

"It's a bug! You liked the mantis we found!"

"The mantis was cool! That was terrifying!"

"Your face is terrifying!" he quips back with all the maturity and grace of a toddler.

Ryuishi has the grace to look severely affronted. "Rude. Hella rude," she huffs out.

"I'm gonna go get it back, I wanna look at it some more, dattebayo!" he exclaims, scrambling to his feet.

Ryuishi lunges and grabs him around the waist. The two of them tumble into the grass and Naruto squawks like a startled goose and pulls her hair. She wails, but gleams with pride. He's fighting dirty, just like his big sister. What a precious child.

They end up wrestling, laughing and giggling like the kids they are. She lets the warmth fill her heart like an inflating balloon. It is so very easy to care.

AN:All these NAMES! Alright, so, more story building in this chapter. Sweet, she has a persona being built here and has given Naruto people that will be able to watch out for him if he needs it. Already seeing a little influence of personalities here. That being said, some people are wondering if there is a time

skip ahead. The answer is a definite no, not for a while. If you don't see plot, you might need to look a little harder. A lot of shit is happening and in this arc, the devil is in the details. details that become super important later on. This is a slow burn though, so sorry if that change is a bit, sorry about this, remember that trip coming up? It's this Wednesday, and it last for five days. There might be wifi but if there is it will be dial up type shit, so, slow as hell. I'll try to update, but no promises.

Thanks to all my lurkers, readers and reviewers. I hope somebody gives you free food just because they like you.

A gigantic, enormous thanks to my beta Enbi, who helps me out so much. Seriously, they're the greatest.

Chapter Question time: Ryuishi and (insert any character here) are trapped in a small, dark room for at least eight hours. What happens?

Meeting Drunken Downers

I do not own Naruto.

Funnily enough, it seems that her life, as crazy as it is, hold some sort of pattern to it. Ryuishi means this in the vaguest sense of the term, of course, but really it is a little intimidating. Once is a coincidence, twice is the beginnings of a pattern. She wonders if the God of her old world would be the sort to do this, or maybe perhaps some of the smaller pantheon dwellers. It seems like their kind of shenanigans, to take an unwary mortal and throw them into a new life with old memories and then consistently throw incredibly strange, shitty choices her way.

Perhaps it is karma, a roundabout punishment for all her insidious plotting. The payment for establishing bonds with children on foundations of misdirections, or betraying those who she would still give her life for. Maybe it's retribution for involving a countless number of people in a bloody and shady underground revolutionary movement that is slowly working its way around the world. Could it be that this is what she gets for imposing one culture over another? Hell if she knows, it's weird as fuck.

To be honest, it was her last night hanging around Konoha. Goodbyes with Naruto had already taken place, a safe house had been established, and Kagami would be expecting her soon. She just wanted to appreciate the night life of Konoha before she left.

(Okay, maybe she just didn't want to hang out in the Okiya while they serviced customers. The moaning and sighing cut right through the thin walls, and left her really fucking uncomfortable. Voyeurism is *not* a kink she has.)

So she's walking along, enjoying the night air and steadily working her way into the seedier bits of Konoha's red light district, and who does she spot? Why, that same young uptight ANBU that was after

her dick last time, Hatake Kakashi. Really, she should have just left as soon as she figured out who it was. It would be for the best. Most definitely the anal bastard would eventually recognize her if she hovered around too much, even if she was all dolled up.

Only... the bastard looks incredibly pathetic, all alone in a stool by the bar. She can smell the liquor from here, and the fact that he hasn't reacted to her watching him means he's already pretty far gone. Not only that, it seems like he's just... she doesn't know, imploded? Like he's collapsed under the weight of something incredible to bear. A morose air hangs around him, his head planted firmly on the bar as he sways from his perfectly still seat.

The guy is fucking thrashed. She's seen it a hundred times before with narcotics addicts on the nod. It's the near overdose perfectly calculated to push you far, far away from reality that she saw opiate users constantly putting themselves in. He needs a trip sitter, or a friend, but when she looks around, nobody is there.

Hatake Kakashi is a glass away from alcohol poisoning, and it looks like nobody notices but her.

Which is sorta fucked up, really. Because if he's on a downward spiral, who is she to stop him? He's just another Konoha nin, the clandestine enemy of deserters like herself. He'd probably stab her if he were in shape enough to do anything but collapse and vomit on the ground.

It's just... the silver haired man walled in by empty bottles looks like a lost kid. He's what, seventeen? Eighteen? Drowning himself in some back alley bar seems like a bit too familiar to her. Like, say, an eleven year old fresh from the front lines and the betrayal of her comrades surrounded by moonshine jugs, all alone by a river, contemplating how much more she has to drink before drowning is less of a suicide and more of a happy accident.

Ryuishi bites her lip, briefly appreciates the taste of berry lip stain, and realizes she's projecting again. Knowing what she is doing

doesn't help though, because in the end, all empathy can be explained as projecting. She knows broken pieces when she sees them, and if a world class criminal with a penchant for manipulation and science helped her, than maybe she can help out here. It doesn't even have to be much. Just get him home, watch him for cold skin and irregular breathing, and help him work it out of his system before leaving.

Dammit, she thinks, I'm going all fucking soft.

Why is it so hard to justify kindness, and so very easy to make reasons for murder? She gets nothing out of this shit deal, but she's walking up to the bar anyway. The woman behind the counter takes one look at her, and promptly ignores her again.

Smart woman, that bartender.

With quiet steps, she approaches from the side, her hair billowing behind her. Up close and personal, Hatake looks even worse. His face is still firmly planted on the wooden surface in front of him, but his hair is a tangled mess and the clothes he is wearing are stained and ragged looking. He smells like wet earth, funeral incense, and an entire barrel of alcohol. He's probably been mixing booze, which is a horrible choice. Tomorrow is going to be hell for him.

"Hey man, time to go."

Her voice is soft and gentle, her hands reaching out to rest where he can see them. Slowly, his head turns to look at her, and his eye is glazed and foggy. Forget seeing double-at this point, he might be seeing right through her and into another dimension.

"I'm nah lurking fer good time," he slurs out.

Well, maybe she was wrong. He obviously thinks she's a hooker, which is both good and bad. Great that he doesn't recognize her, bad that she's so forgettable. It hurts her pride.

"Not here to give one. Just here to get you home," she answers. Besides, whiskey dick is totally a thing.

"M' fine," he tells her.

"Well, *you* are being a real moodkiller. Nobody wants to party in a place with a half-dead guy sitting in the corner. C'mon." She doesn't hear whatever he's trying to tell her in response, because he's picking up his head, obviously trying to sit up and look intimidating. The only problem is that he's so wrecked, he can't. Instead, he is lurching forward, and her arms are rising up to steady him.

"Still fine, buddy?" she asks

His head hangs to his chest, and he might be blacking out. Which, really, that can't be a good sign. She sighs and casts a glance over to the bartender, who is still attempting to ignore them both. Ryuishi rolls her eyes and digs some cash out of her obi and slides it on to the counter, and suddenly, she has all the attention she could want.

"Help me get him on my back," she sighs.

The stocky woman shuffles around, and they arrange the unconscious male into some semblance of order. He feels clammy, but his breathing is alright at least. As soon as she wraps her arms under his thighs and hoists him up, she notices how wiry the man is. He feels like he's made of metal, thick cords of tangible strength beneath her fingertips. She tries not to think of how easy he could kill her right now.

The bartender helps her pull her hair to hang over her shoulder to one side, free from the danger of being vomited on, and directs her to the shinobi apartment complexes halfway across town. She adds that it would probably be better to take the back alleys to avoid suspicion. Which adds to that distance. Great, not like she had anything better planned tonight anyway.

Ryuishi huffs and sets out at a slow gait, trying to ignore the cloth covered nose dug into the crook of her neck and the moist breath against her skin. She doesn't know what to do about it, and so she tries to pretend the whole thing isn't happening.

He isn't heavy, she supposes. Not really, but then again, she's used to carrying heavier burdens than just one man. Strength is a core staple of her taijutsu style, right alongside flexibility, and it had only been growing throughout the years. From endurance training on the beach, to pack mule marches with weighted seals with Orochimaru, she's been steadily increasing the damage she can do.

Ryuishi sings softly to herself as they pass through a dirty alleyway, trying to fill the stifling quiet with her inherent need to babble. The darkness is encroaching around her, and she can hear the distant howling of nothingness.

" I walked across an empty land

I knew the pathway like the back of my hand

I felt the earth beneath my feet

Sat by a river and it made me complete. "

It's weird what pop culture things she recalls from her past life. She, of course, still obsessively recalls her family every night, but songs and stories still linger in her head like a bad case of herpes. She supposes she always did have a good head for tales and myths, which is helpful to remember plot points. If only she had a sort of timeline memorized. That would have been helpful.

"You smell nice."

Ryuishi jumps out of her skin, jolting like a thief caught red handed. There hadn't been any indication of him waking, for Buddha's sake!

The man on her back groans as the movement jostles him, and she hears another few slurred words. She feels a hand tighten on her shoulder.

"Imma be sick."

Ryuishi shuffles over to a dumpster as quickly as she can, and feels his weight shift. She doesn't know if anybody else has ever noticed this, but it is completely weird to have somebody throw up in the trash while they are still hanging on your back. Like, really weird.

She hears the wet slap of biological sludge hit the thin metal of the dumpster's side, and the sharp tang of bile wiggles itself into her nose. God damn, she hates this part.

It goes on for a while before she feels his clenching stomach stop randomly seizing against her spine. Then, once again, a cloth covered face is pressed against the barred line of her throat.

"Sing more," he tells her, and she wrinkles her nose at the stench of vomit lingering on his breath. Also, that's real demanding for some drunk asshole. Isn't he some sort of super soldier? Like, why hasn't he stabbed her in the kidney yet? Or snapped her neck? Or pulled out her spine through her throat?

Then Ryuishi realizes that she almost forgot-for all his coldness and pomp, Hatake Kakashi is still human. He's just a guy who thinks he lost one teammate, definitely stabbed another, and had his sensei die. Not to mention ANBU, and generally shitty coping mechanisms. The guy is so socially awkward it makes her hurt. Forget grief counseling, the copy-nin chose to encourage violent and ruthless espionage tendencies in a shadowy secret police organization while also ignoring how to interact with everyday people. If she were the gambling kind, she'd bet money on him not being to hold a conversation about anything other than his job, and even then a short one.

"Help me get to your house and I'll keep going," she bargains.

He manages to rattle some numbers directly into her pulse point, which isn't weird at all, and she picks the song back up.

" Oh simple thing, where have you gone?

I'm getting tired and I need someone to rely on. "

Her steps are carefully timed to be in the same cadence of the song, her wooden geta lifting her over the puddles and grit of the pathways. Wooden flip flops, she had decided long ago, were weirdly instrumental footwear.

She is once again startled out of her thoughts when she feels the hand on her shoulder reach over and begin to tangle in her hair, rough fingers combing through the dark locks. It's official. Blind drunk Kakashi is weird.

"You smell familiar," he whisper-shouts, like it's some big secret.

"I smell like the brothel."

"Like flowers and blood and the sea-" here he takes another inhale, and she tries to focus on pop culture in her head. Wasn't Game Grumps crazy? How about that Game of Thrones?

"-and indecision and loneliness."

"You must be a real riot at parties," she remarks, changing the subject. Fucking dog-nosed bastard.

"I don' want sex," he slurs out again.

"Like you even could, whiskey dick. I'm only here to make sure some random guy doesn't die in some seedy bar."

The man nods, and his hair tickles under her chin. God save her from dealing with drunk people when sober. This is a fucking hassle. Why the hell is she here again?

"Why are you even this drunk?" she asks, taking a right.

"Anniversary."

Anniversary of what? As far as she knows the man isn't married, but things could have-Oh. Wrong kind. More than likely it's the anniversary of someone's death. With him, that could be a lot of people.

Well that's shitty.

"Why 'r you alone?"

A spark of defensiveness rises and she bites her lip. Seriously, fuck this asshole. He can't even recognize her, and he's still being a pushy little shit. What right does a friend killer like him have to ask her that?

Ryuishi breathes out, letting that thought go. He's not a friend killer, not really.

"I fucked up, and I failed some people," she answers, more than a little honest.

The grip on her shoulders tightens, and she can feel his whole body shiver against her. Apparently, that was the right thing to say, as weird as it seems.

"Failed," he tells her, and she can't tell if it's a question for her, a simple statement, or a damnation for them both.

"Yah," she says, "Failed, you gigantic, depressing dick."

The rest of the walk is done in silence, and she can feel Hatake slipping in and out of consciousness on her back, his head lolling to in time with her steps. Turns out the man lives on the top floor of some swanky ass apartment complex. Well, swanky compared to what she remembers from her old world and Naruto's place.

Admittedly, her own house dwarfs his condo, and she lives in the sprawling expanse of it just fine.

Ryuishi digs around in his pocket for the familiar feel of metal, and he squirms a bit before procuring keys from a hidden pocket in his vest. Which is fine with her, because it would have felt a little molester-y to dig them out from there.

She takes care to not set off any potential traps in the joint as she walks through the obsessively neat area. It seems almost neurotic, but she can relate. When her life was out of control, she must have rearranged her room four times a day. Her care is rewarded when she isn't impaled by kunai when stepping into his room.

"Alright buddy, you're going to have to stay awake now. I need you to drink some water and maybe eat something. Stay under the blankets, though."

He's as cold as her, and that can't be good.

Ryuishi rummages around, somehow finds a glass to use without triggering an explosive seal, and fills it from a purifier in the fridge. Internally, she scoffs. What is he, too good for tap water like the rest of them? Whatever the reason is, she ends up bringing the liquid to him, dragging the empty kitchen trash can behind her. It's only a matter of time before he begins to get sick again.

In the whole two fucking second it took her, he's passed out on his shuriken-patterned blankets, face down on a pillow. Which also isn't good. She slaps his calf muscle, darting out of the way when he goes to put his fist through her torso on reflex.

"Nut up, pretty boy. You're going to drink a fucking whole shit ton of water before the night is through. Nobody's dying tonight," she tells him, setting the trash can down and thrusting the glass in his face as he blinks lazily.

"Water?"

"Water first, then after you can keep that down, we'll try tea and maybe some starches. You've probably never had Kaya toast, but let me tell you it is a miracle worker."

"Ka... ya... toast?"

She snorts and thrusts the water at him again, and then rolls her eyes when he fumbles with the glass. She sets it on the side table for a second before bodily forcing him into an upright sitting position, his back braced by pillows. Then, she sits down by his legs and looks him in the eye.

"I'm going to hold the glass for you, so you don't spill it all over like an asshole, and you are going to drink. If you want, I can shut my eyes or you can cover them."

Hatake stares uncomprehendingly, and she picks up the glass in one hand, his wrist in the other. The glass she holds up, level to his face. His wrist she brings up to her own, until he can cover her eyes with the palm of his hand. Strangely enough, it reminds her of the time she stuck her fingers in Kisame's mouth to prove she didn't care about what he looked like.

She doesn't quite know when he finally gets it, but at some point she can feel another clammy hand over hers, tilting the glass up. The one over her eyes presses tighter against her face, and she momentarily submits herself to blindness and silence. It would be simple enough for him to kill her of a manner of ways like this. He could tear out her trachea, the way she did to that man in the alley, or he could smother her like she has done to so many sentries before. If he wanted to, he could choke the life from her, or slit her open, navel to neck, with a shard of glass or kunai. There are endless possibilities of death in this moment, but she feels strangely apathetic about it.

She hears the sound of him swallowing and feels the soft exhale of breath against her fingers, and then she can see again. Without words, she gets back up and fills the cup, leaving it at his bedside.

There isn't the ingredients to make Kaya toast, it turns out. Mostly because there isn't Kaya, a sweet coconut jam, in this whole fucking world. Which is total bullshit. Neither can she make her next go-to, Menudo. This is mostly due to the fact that there is no hominy, tripe, chiles, or beef in Hatake's pantry or fridge. What he does have is some eggs, rice and poultry. Congee it is, she supposes.

From the other room, she hears the beginnings of some truly awful hurling session. Soft gagging and dry heaving emanates from the room, the lightning before the thunder.

"Holler if you need help!" she calls out, setting up the porridge in a pot after disabling the incendiary device connected to the stove. Honestly, this whole apartment is rigged beyond measure. What if he was a little tired and wanted a fucking cup of tea? She'd blow herself to hell and back if she had half the shit he did. Luckily, her house is hidden and the land is sort of a trap of it's own. She'd choose poisonous snakes, sweaty bogs, treacherous predators, and just nature in general over stove bombs anyway.

A muffled cry claims her attention, and she turns the heat down to simmer, pulling the pitcher from the fridge with a sigh. He's going to be one of those unpredictable drunks, isn't he?

Hatake Kakashi wordlessly opens his mouth as a his body cramps painfully tight and burning fire makes its way up his throat. His stomach is rebelling against him, and his abdomen is screaming out as hot bile coats his tongue, and the world spins like he is flipping through the trees. Liquid splashes into the trash.

He remembers that today was the day he got his eye, the day that-

His thought is cut off as he wonders why the room is so blazingly hot, and why the trashcan is in the room again. Lucky that it is though, he doesn't think he can stand, let alone walk to the bathroom. Somebody steps into the room behind him, and he hears water filling up a cup. Distantly, he is grateful that he had that to throw up instead of the nothingness inside from before.

How'd he get home again?

A strangely familiar rounded face peeks into view, curtained by a waterfall of inky black. She walks forward and sets something down on the nightstand-a bottle of acid reducer and some simple pain medication. Somehow, he knows he should know her, but for some reason he can't recall her name. Which is rude of him.

Is she one of the working girls that sometimes visits Genma? Has he... has he visited her before? Kakashi can't remember, not when his head is flooded with liquor and his brain is sloshing around inside his skull. All he knows is that she smells nice, and her hair is soft. Also, she is giving him water, which is nice, because his mouth tastes like something crawled inside of it and exploded in a horrible fiery death.

"Man, you are a *mess*," she tells him.

For a second he gets angry. Who does she think she is? "You're a hooker," he spits, only it doesn't come out like that. Instead, it sounds more like 'Ur ah whookar.'

She smirks, and he can see it in her eyes how unaffected she is. Some little civilian girl, who never seen anything. What does she know? She's never seen her friends die. She's never had to make the choice between comrade and mission. She just lies on her back all day. She wouldn't even been here if it weren't for people like him.

Her dark eyes narrow and the smirk turns into a frown. He realizes belatedly that he said all of that out loud, then leans over the trashcan to vomit again. He makes sure to pull down his mask only when the sides of the can will cover his face.

She doesn't say anything, but he can feel the dip in the bed as she sits beside him, and feels her cool hands rubbing soothing circles on his back. He regrets his words almost immediately as the anger rushes out of him, replaced by nausea and melancholy. She's just a hooker, she doesn't have to know what it's like.

He ignores the niggling sensation in that back of his head telling him that no, that's not it, and he knows what she really does. He's too drunk to care.

"You're right," she murmurs softly, and he thinks she might smoke. His voice sounds like she does, but his nose is telling him she doesn't.

"I wouldn't be here if it weren't for shinobi," she says, and he can hear faint traces of bitterness. "Then again, we wouldn't be here if it weren't for farmers, or doctors, or teachers. Stall owners, merchants, and maids and everything else. Lots of jobs are important, so don't badmouth those in the sex trade. It's the oldest profession in the world."

He makes a gurgling noise in the back of his throat and washes saliva around his mouth before spitting into the trash. "Water," he croaks.

A glass is placed in his hand and she is to leave the room again. He takes a moment to appreciate the autumn leaves swirling around on the bottom hem of her kimono crawling up to her hip, then finally notices the embroidered dragon spiraling up her spine before she leaves through the door. It is an intricately detailed piece that settles nicely on the black background fabric. It must have been expensive.

He hears the stove click off, and the clinking of bowls and silverware. He ignores it in favor of drinking even more water, and then swallowing the chalky, minty sludge that is bismuth-type medication. Who put that on his nightstand again?

He can feel the effects almost immediately, the cooling sensation trickling down his scratchy throat and burning stomach. It gives him the relief he needs to walk (re: crawl) into the bathroom to relieve himself and brush his teeth. He ends up splattering toothpaste everywhere, and he tears down the shower curtain when he tries to balance himself on it when peeing, but he figures that everything can be fixed. Tomorrow. Now he can sleep, right here on the cool tile.

Then the pushy hooker is poking her head through the bathroom door, sighing when she takes in the wreckage. She picks him up, and he wants to laugh or maybe throw up again, because bridal style is not exactly the best way to carry him right now. He can walk just fine, honest.

"Take some aspirin before you go under, the congee is in the fridge for breakfast," she tells him as she moves the blankets for him, laying him on the bed. Her skin is cold, like the tiles on the bathroom floor, and he likes the feel of it.

Wordlessly, he takes her hand as she reaches out to remove his hitai-ate for him, his fingers tracing the ice-like digits, seeping the heat from his hands and putting it in hers. He hears her snort, and then laugh. He decides she makes a lot of happy sounds for somebody who smells so conflicted.

"Take the medicine already, and give me my hand back."

"You feel nice," he tells her seriously.

"And you sound like a serial killer when you say that."

His hand clasps tight over hers and he tugs, sending her off balance. She stumbles with a curse and falls onto him. Kakashi sighs, because her body is so cold, so soothing through the heat of liquor and drunkenness. She wiggles as he wraps his arms around her shoulders, trapping her arms by her sides, and she huffs out a laugh against his chest.

"You are going to hate yourself come morning," she tells him seriously, but he doesn't listen. The world is spinning and sliding sideways in front of him, and he feels like he might actually get a good night's sleep tonight, sprawled out in his bed holding an ice pack.

He closes his eye and leans back into the comfort of his mattress, playing idly with the strands of her hair, letting it slip between his

fingertips as it fans out around them. She shifts a little, and he can feel the weight of her moving from his chest to his side, her own hands respectfully on herself, while his remain around her.

"Oh," she whispers, and it is a strangely sad sound. "I forgot how nice it was to have heater."

He doesn't know what she is talking about, but he hums anyway, oblivion calling his name. In the darkness of his home and the comfort of his sheets, he falls asleep.

The next morning, he wakes up with the world's driest mouth and the faint scent of blossoms and sea water clinging to his sheets. The trash can is back in its place, and everything is neat and orderly. The only thing odd is the glass of water by his bed, and the soft stink of vomit and alcohol hanging heavy on his clothes. Which is distinctly strange and unsettling, because he can recall something different.

He washes up, and notes that he can remember only snippets from last night. He knows he was drunk, it was Obito's death day. He always got drunk. Usually he ends up at Gai's house, or sprawled out on the bathroom floor, but the shower curtain is hanging just fine, and he doesn't feel as violently ill as usual, as if some one had a med-nin help him out.

There is a sensation of uneasiness in his gut as he settles down for breakfast, pulling some cooling congee out of his fridge that he can't remember ordering. Or making. Usually, he wouldn't eat it at all, but he is trained to be the best of the best and he detects no poisons. That, and the ingredients to it are missing from his larder.

Kakashi squints his eyes as he slips his mask down and tries to recall what happened a little bit harder.

He remembers flashes of alleyways and the burning scarlet lamps of the red light district, the burn of cheap liquor in his throat and his stomach. There is the faint recollection of someone carrying him,

and the image of bronze leaves on a black kimono. A round face with coal eyes and long black hair.

A familiar face.

He spoons the savory meal into his mouth, and take a moment to appreciate the flavor of it for a second, thinking about the features for a moment.

He freezes and chokes, spitting the rice gruel everywhere. His heart hammers in his chest, and his eyes go wide. The cursing, the teasing, the bronze skin.

"Fuck. *Fuck*," he whispers.

The Kiri no Ningyo had hauled him home, had been inside his house, inside the village. The A-rank missing-nin girl had seen him and picked him out. She had... rubbed his back while he puked?

He remembers singing, and forceful demands from her to drink water, a conversation about failure. Countless time she could have killed him, an easy thing to do when he was in such a state. Only, here he was, better than most mornings after.

The murderess from the Mist, the girl known for being a ruthless monster had let him cover her eyes so she wouldn't see his face and carried him on her back halfway across town. She had slept beside him and let him drunkenly invade her space, consistently caring for him. She had bared her throat to him without consequence.

Suddenly, the congee on the table top makes him confused.

His apartment smells faintly of pear blossoms and seaside breezes, and he doesn't know what to think of it.

Meeting a Mashup

I do not own Naruto

"-I mean, they were fanatical, Kagami! Completely devoted, and I had never met a single one of them before in my whole goddamned life. It's fucking ridiculous. The brothel mother, Misaki, she literally got down on her knees when we met. I'm not sure, but I think they had a shrine somewhere too. The whole time I was there it was 'Ryuu-hime this' and 'Ryuu-hime that'. Mind numbing, and terrifying. Did I already mention they fucking watched me sleep?" Ryuishi rants, pacing the hard wooden floors of the grand Okiya.

Outside the floor-to-ceiling windows, the evergreen forest of Kumo creaks in the howling winds; the grey, overcast skies threatening rain. She is tempted to go out on the deck there and see if the fresh air would help, or maybe the amazing view from the towering heights, but she knows that what she really needs is Orochimaru's correspondence and Kagami's explanation.

She whirls, her dark eyes narrowed and accusing. "Why didn't you tell me it had gotten like this?" she spits. "The Mumei have made me out to be sort of divine being, and I don't fucking care for it at all."

The aging woman laughs, her steely eyes closed with mirth. It is a dry sound, one that comes from women who have spent many years inhaling smoke in crowded bars and sultry back rooms. The matron looks every one of her fifty-some years of life, her weathered face mirthful and lined.

"I did tell you, girl," she says hoarsely. "I said they called you Rakki Ryuu and hailed you as the burner and scourge of Kiri, and I said they loved you more than anything else. That blonde woman, Hanako, has been spreading your word. These are not the deeds of a normal civilian or kunoichi. They do not have followings of nomads,

or the devotion of almost every low born orphan and whore. They do not have the trust of the merchant and farmer alike, nor the ears of the politicians."

"Shrines, Kagami! Shrines!" Ryuishi exclaims, planting her hands flat on the teak wood table where Kagami sits comfortable in her seiza.

"Yes, and tithes. Money that goes there ends up with the greedy and needful alike. Every time you or your followers are seen rebuilding ramshackle Okiya or driving off assaulters and bandits, they build another. River country is littered with them after you helped with the flooding."

Ryuishi groans out loud and flops boneless to the floor, smacking her head on the table. She's not religious, per se, but this sounds like she's asking for trouble. Not only is there the possibility that an actual God might get offended, which her mother always assured her would happen, but humanity tends to have a thing about killing their gods. Though strangely enough, they always indulge their demons.

Religion is a weird concept here, practiced but also not. There are Shinto shrines and Buddhist monks that stand hand in hand with Taoist temples, not to mention the weird cults that pop up here and there. Adding another one is dangerous, even if its only problem is that it's aggressively kind and idealistic. Wars have been started over this sort of shit, and she definitely doesn't want that.

"I can't be a god. I can barely even be a human being. What the fuck am I supposed to do, Kagami-okaasan?" she groans, her words spoken through smashed lips pressed into glossed wood.

Kagami clicks her teeth and hums low in the back of her throat, emitting a grave, thoughtful sound. "They love you even more for being like them," she says. "The daughter of a whore, forced into the life of a soldier. They empathize because you too have starved and struggled against the harshness of the world. It means that much more that you make mistakes and form attachments. To them, you are the absolute embodiment of an idea, but human all the same."

"That sounds awful."

"It must be such a heavy burden, to have the adoration of so many," Kagami remarks sarcastically.

"It is! If I fuck up, the whole thing turns sour! If I die in one country, the others will turn on it and tear it to pieces, no matter what actually happened. They'll do things in my name that I don't approve of and then people will get the wrong idea and everybody will turn on them. They'll start doing crazy shit. Why is the world giving me even more responsibility? Didn't it see what happened last time? I lost my fucking mind and became besties with a goddamn literal psychopath, and then I hid in his fucking evil lair for like, four goddamn years!"

"You also established the world's greatest information network, set up a health care system for your people, and began to build places of education for the everyday civilian. All while being the figurehead of a slow-burning revolution," Kagami reminds her.

"I didn't do any of that on purpose! I was following fucking whims!" Ryuishi cries out.

Kagami doesn't dignify that with an answer, instead just settling for pursed lips and a dead stare. The teenager has no idea what she's getting at with that sort of bitchface, but it isn't helping anything. Time to move on.

"Also, what is this I hear about people rooting for romantic involvement with my teammates?"

Kagami has the good grace to look a little embarrassed, pulling away from her stoic visage to glance out the window behind Ryuishi.

"Well, Hanako came here a few times and wanted to know about what happened when you were in the Academy, and then the front lines. We might have been discussing some ideas about your unit, and how close you all were..."

"Oh. My. *God* . You didn't."

"I honestly thought you were dating one of them already!" defends the woman.

"I was eleven!"

"A very mature eleven!" she counters, "Don't tell me it wasn't strange the way you all slept in a pile-"

"Kiri is fucking cold!"

"-or constantly scanned over each other for injuries-"

"That's what teammates do!"

"-or the way the both of them always looked at you!" she breathes, "You three were inseparable! Even we heard it, all the way outside in the Akasen. The Chigiri no Kaijuu were the best frontal assault unit in history, and they all were obsessive about each other-that's what *everyone* said. If you found one, you had better look out for the other two. There were bets on who would end up with who!"

"Please tell me there are no more bets," Ryuishi deadpans.

The Okiya mother doesn't say a word, and the bronze-skinned youth wants to pull out her fucking hair. How many shit ball, dick sucking, ass punching, chicken kicking, fart sniffing more ridiculous things did her life need? What was next? Actual healthy, totally random acts of kindness? What mad world does she live in?

(Somewhere far away, in the windswept plains of the desert, Temari stares at the sweet chestnuts her youngest brother just procured. One second he was there, terrifying and hated. The next, he pulled her favorite snack from his pockets, dropped it on her lap, and then just left.

No words, nothing.

Cautiously, she picks the bag up, and gladly notices it is from one of the newer merchants that come through, the candy woman. He must have gotten Yashamaru to buy them, but still. What the *hell* ?)

"Entropy and disorder reign in the universe. My life is one big fucking joke. Call off the bets, they both hate me," Ryuishi whines.

"Oh, stop being such a pessimist. You gave them both the clues, right? One day, they're going to come back, and-"

"OH MY GOD, JUST STOP," she shouts.

Kagami narrows her eyes at the command, measuring the emotions behind it. Ryuishi is mildly irritated because that wound still bleeds inside of her, the gaping holes the boys left. She still aches over the hope that maybe, just *maybe*, that fairy tale might come true, and it hurts more than a katon to the face. The fact that other people are treating it as a game, that they even think they know what happened- it's stupid. She left them, she betrayed them, and she burnt their home to the ground. Really, it's as simple as that. She would hate her too.

"Just stop, Kagami. Never speak of this to me again, and warn the others about it as well," Ryuishi sighs tiredly.

Kagami nods her head stiffly, the teasing air gone from the room. Outside, the wind howls and the glass panes rattle inside their frames.

"What's going on in the Land of Rice Paddies?" Ryuishi asks, desperate for a change of subject.

Kagami shifts back to look at her, her manicured nails tapping a pattern on the wood. Ryuishi honestly tries to ignore it, but the little things are beginning to add up, one by one. The stress of constantly being on the run, the ever-present need to hide, the loneliness of having no actual social structure to support her other than Orochimaru. No one to connect to or hang out with.

It's an empty existence, she thinks, constantly traveling from place to place with no one to talk to. She goes days without saying anything, just passing through wilderness. To the Mumei, she is a figurehead, always being measured and fawned over. To Kagami, she is the leader, the cash cow that keeps her safe and plans out changes. Even with Naruto and Gaara, she has to be something of a mature adult, helping them, teaching them.

She is Rakki Ryuu, the scourge of Kiri, Missing nin, Aneue and Nee-san. She only gets to be Watanabe Ryuishi when she is alone.

"The people are already seeing improvement in crop production and livestock health with your recommendations. They are also thankful for the schoolhouses and educational equipment," Kagami tells her, drawing her away from her morose teenage thoughts. Damn puberty, damn it all to hell.

This is good news, though. The people will welcome her with open arms, and that will make plans for future development all the easier.

"How about the progress in the Land of Grass and the Land of Rivers?" she questions, settling down into a cross-legged position.

"The refugees there have a firm hold on the darker sides of life. As discussed before, The Land of Rivers is a hive of activity for the Mumei and most are waiting for your divine intervention, if not willing to give a hand. Grass is a little bit harder. There is competition among the whores with refugees from Rain, and something stinks in Ame. I haven't gotten a single report from inside of it yet," Kagami rattles off.

Ryuishi sighs and pulls the pin out of her hair, letting it down for a second before spinning it back up, careful to avoid the barbed wire woven in it.

"Stop trying to figure it out. I know what's happening in Ame, and I want my people to have nothing to do with it. I won't say to spread the word to avoid it all together, because trade is always welcome,

but I will say to watch it carefully from afar. If any word comes from it, I want to be the first that hears it, Kagami."

"Is it so dangerous?" the matron asks.

"Yes. It's volatile now, and in the future will be even more so. Everybody needs to remain under the radar around them."

"Is that why you're setting up so many plants inside of Grass?"

"That, and I want a net around the larger nations. If we can claim these as loyal, we will have three separate surrounding countries around Fire Country, and the main traffic ways between Lightning, Wind, Fire and Earth," the anxious teen admits.

"If one can control the civilian roads and the most commonly traveled shinobi paths, one can control the trade and the spread of information. Not to mention the food produced in Rice and Grass. You're aiming to control their stomachs," Kagami says with dawning realization.

"River also controls the transport from Water Country onto the continent. Not to mention various other textiles, medicines and technology from the three."

"Clever," Kagami comments.

"Maybe. I'm not even counting the other hot spots for the nameless or the Mistresses and Gentlemen you have contact with. All these logistics are giving me a headache," she answers, rubbing her temples. The amount of numbers in all of it is something she doesn't deal with though, having delegated it to Kagami herself. The woman is a powerhouse at accounting, and usually Ryuishi just goes where she's told she's needed.

The steely matron claps her hands, loudly, and the sliding door opens. A young, fit man comes inside with a tea set and Ryuishi

flashes him a thankful smile. For a second, the blond looks starstruck, but one glance from Kagami sends him on his way.

Ryuishi takes the time Kagami uses to make them both tea to cram a few bites of raw fish salad in her mouth, savoring the savory slide of it against her tongue. She has no clue who makes it, or how they found out it was her favorite food, but she suspects it might come from the fact that she made it regularly as a child in Kiri. The couple of times she's been here, she saw ceviche alongside the poke, and she has no fucking idea how they figured that recipe out. Citrus is hard to get in Kumo.

Kagami finishes pouring them both a fragrant cup of jasmine green tea and takes a sip of her own, her movements practiced and delicate. Ryuishi continues eating with one hand, and slurping up her tea with the other.

"The Sannin sent another missive the other day. As usual, the scroll refuses to open, so you're probably going to have to pump chakra through it again," the older woman tells her.

Ryuishi groans around a mouthful of food as Kagami digs said message out of her obi. It's probably just another note reminding her to take her medication and eat healthy. The man is such a nag.

Placing her teacup on the table, she takes the scroll and pushes her chakra into the waxy-looking seal. As it unfurls, she hears a hiss, and a tiny viper drops onto her lap. Another backup, the paranoid bastard. If the summon hadn't recognized her, she'd be dead.

"Hey, little cutie. Did mean old Orochimaru tie your summoning to the opening of this? Poor baby. You deserve a snack."

The thick-scaled purple snake flicks out his tongue at her, looking like a cold-eyed beggar who just might murder you. Somehow, over the years, Ryuishi had gotten into the habit of spoiling the overgrown noodles, and they all knew it. She suspects that the snake summons

community is regularly reminded of what to expect when dealing with their master's wayward partner.

Ryuishi rifles through her bag in the corner, eventually procuring a small egg. She has no idea where or when she got it. Thinking about it, it's probably when she raided that quail nest a while back. Her offering is deemed worthy by the animal, who snaps it up before disappearing. No doubt Orochimaru's next letter will be a reprimand for giving his summons un-approved food, but whatever.

Her eyes skim over the letter, and she palms the bottle of her medication that came with it. *Regularly take once a week with a meal, blahblahblah, maintain progress in physical and ninjutsu training, blahblahblah, make sure to sleep* . Seriously, what a mother hen.

She sticks the scroll inside the fireplace behind Kagami, and continues on collecting the information she missed from her last visit.

Traveling the Land of Lightning is always a very enchanting experience, if you ask Ryuishi.

Jutting stones crop out of the mountainous earth, and the views from the heights never fail to be scenic. The beaches are really great too, the sort of overcast skies and dark waters that come hand in hand with more northern terrains. Really, it's kind of hard to beat the stormy and bleak of this part of the continent, and journeying through it is a treasure.

Or, it would be a treasure if she didn't have to be so damn sneaky all the time. Honestly, she gets that she is a missing-nin who burned down her village and all that shit, but having to hide so much is a pain in the ass. The sooner they bumped up her rank, the better, because then she wouldn't have to deal with so many happy-go-lucky bounty hunters who were in way over their heads. Bandits already knew better than to start shit with Mist-nin on principle, but

greedy ass money grabbers? They always thought they could get the drop on her.

Admittedly, that didn't happen so much anymore. Flitting around for so long had added to her already impressive arsenal of tricks. Her leaving behind any sort of trace at this point was almost laughable because she was so neurotic in her tendency to clean up her trails. Still, corpses are kind of hard to hide.

She wipes off her blood soaked foot on some dead-was that Iwa? It might be Iwa. They had used doton jutsu, right?- some dead Iwa nin's tunic. She had managed to actually kick her way through somebody's torso, and believe her, no one was more surprised than herself. The action had left her foot filthy though, and thus, his now dead friend got to be used as a cleaning rag.

She looks around at the shoreline and feels a little guilty for not feeling guilty. These guys looked like they were only a few years older than her, so young and fresh faced. If only they had chosen a better attack pattern, or minded her range limitations... but they didn't. They tried to kill her, and now they were dead.

She honestly almost couldn't care less. She says almost because now her foot is dirty, and she has to hide these fuckers.

Ryuishi casts her eyes toward the rough looking surface. She honestly doesn't know jack about the currents here, but she does know that the water is as cold as ice. She was just swimming in it, after all. Why these two-bit bounty hunters tried to take her out so close to her greatest strength, she would never know.

Theoretically, if she takes the remains out far enough, they'll get eaten before they can bloat and come back up. If there isn't some crazy riptide that stretches out forever, or a lack of local fauna to assist in that. If she just left them, it would be a gigantic sign pointing to her whereabouts. Okay, so, if she cuts them up it will help out with hiding them, only that's gross and dirty and she doesn't feel like it.

Hot damn, she wishes Kisame was here right now. His summons were always so helpful with shit like this.

She considers various other options, like a makeshift sky burial, or a incredibly hot pyre, or actually burying them. But no matter what crops up, she always comes back to dumping them in the ocean. She'll call it a sacrificial tribute and be done with it.

She threads her chain through all ten of them like some terribly gruesome needle and thread and coats her feet with chakra. The waves make it harder to pull for a bit, tossing her dead weight-hah, *dead weight*, she's hilarious-to and fro in an attempt to take them back to shore. Once she muscles through it though, they drag behind her in the water, still barely buoyant because they were bludgeoned or stabbed instead of drowned. She isn't sure how far she goes, but in the end, she is only satisfied when land cannot be seen on the horizon.

She yanks her meteor hammer free with one exaggerated tug, and the now-waterlogged cadavers listlessly float into the darkness, the hungry waters stealing them from sight.

Done with her chore, she falls back into the liquid's embrace herself.

There is something to be said about being surrounded on all sides by ocean, with no land in sight. It's like the world has become something so incredibly large and empty when there are no trees and stones and earth in the way. Even though the water is numbingly cold, she feels like she is floating, suspended in the thin line between brackish sea and grey sky. Here, she is not really a thing infected by death, no, she is the Void itself. She is one with the wind and the waves, and her consciousness can spread as far and forever as the elements themselves. Or, whatever. It's just pretty awesome, to look out and see nothing but the ocean and the sky stretching on forever. Like some sort of crazy world where only she exists.

Life isn't like that though, she supposes, kicking her legs towards land again. Whatever poetic rambling she had going on in her head

comes to a halt as she dives underneath the surface and unpins her hair, letting it billow around her, barbed wire and all. It takes her a while to do it this way, swimming through the numbing waters with only chakra to heat her up, but it feels more natural this way, too. It's like, she was *meant* to be imitating an eel or some shit. She doesn't know how to explain it, it just feels right.

Ryuishi reaches shore after what feels like hours later, soaked to the bone and a little bit worn out. She decides to rest halfway up on a jutting rock covered in molluscs, her torso resting against their protruding and uncomfortable hard-shelled bodies. Letting her lower body drift in the water, she shuts her eyes for just a moment. It is because of this, she will say later, that she never realises the other person is there until they are talking to her. Call her unaware, but she never fucking said she was a sensor type.

"Yo, I never thought I would see no mermaid

While chasing down the trail of renegades," a deep voice intones.

Ryuishi nearly shits her fucking pants as she attempts to plop back in the water, hastily dropping from the rock like a guard abandoning post. She hears splashes, chakra-heavy footsteps on water, behind her.

"What would the Ningyo no Chigiri

Be doing hanging out in the northern sea?" it asks again.

She knows exactly who is behind her, and wow, she is so not ready for this. She will never be ready for this. What the fuck is she supposed to do?

"I was on the run and heard there was a punk who thought he was a rapper

So I came to see if he was any good, or was just another actor

Didn't mean to step on any toes by crossing the border

I was chased here by my life's disorder," she blurts out.

Huh. Apparently she is going to solve being cornered by instigating rap battle. She has no idea how this is going to go. There's a reason she never sought out adult jinchuuriki. Their loyalties are solidified, their grasp on reality too unyielding for her subtle manipulations. They're already devoted to their village, willing to take out any threat, and even with her skill level, she would lose in a fight against a person wielding a bijuu. If they wanted they could seek her out, but she is not going to risk being smashed into the ground for pawns that she can go without.

Turning around, she takes in the shellshocked image of a grown man gaping at her as she floats in the water. His white-blond hair billows softly in the wind, and she wonder if he might have actually passed out standing up. Good, now, if she can just throw more ridiculous nonsense his way-

"So there, mist-born fish maid

Came all the way here to see how the game is played?

Well alright little minnow

Go ahead, try and give it a go," he spits, and man, did he just call her a fucking minnow? Fuck him. He wants it, he's sure and the hell gonna get it.

"For a guy who thinks he's a fucking giant

I think his little rhymes are rather reliant

On a weak ass rhythm that is a little bit slow

What kind of wise ass are you, tellin me to 'give it a go?'

I came from the cold, bloodied streets of Kiri

Born in raised in the embrace of the southern sea

I came all the way here to the great land of lightning

To find someone I thought would be worth fighting

Only to find

That he ain't the kind

Of man who rules his rhyme

He's just out of his damned mind," she delivers, her dark eyes narrow, arms crossed as she leans against the rock. There, let him deal with that.

Only he looks like he's seen the face of god. She can't see his eyes, but his sunglasses are sparkling shoujo-style, and that frightens her to an extent. What the ever living fuck is she doing? How does she get into situations like this? She just slaughtered, like, ten people for Christ's sake! What is this crazy world? She doesn't break character, remaining stone faced as he continues, but inside she is a bewildered mess.

"I think me and you maybe started off wrong

'cause I ain't ever heard nobody else singin my song

I been stuck out here in these hills

Trying to make money, tryin to pay bills

And maybe I made a mistake when I said you were a minnow

But you gotta forgive me cause I just didn't know

That this here mermaid had a tongue like a blade

and I would be dismayed if I didn't persuade

her that the words she just laid, the rhymes she displayed

could start a crusade and cause a parade," and holy fucking shit, that last part was incredible. He can probably tell, because he's smiling like a huge dweeb, and man, she can't help it if she's a little impressed. He made that shit up on the spot, and that's intense.

"Uhhh..." Ryuishi comments.

"That being said, you're a wanted nin

And Kumo can't be seen letting those kinds in

So I'll ask you again what you're doing here

And if your words ain't right imma have to make you disappear," Killer Bee finishes, and his aura shifts. Something awful fills the air, and the tingling burn of oppressive chakra fills the space around them.

This is the first time she's felt it, a bijuu's chakra, and it slithers across in the exact opposite way of her own tainted energy. It shoves itself into the forefront of her mind, invading her thought process and stirring up something inside of her. It's heavy and hot like burning oil, slipping across the air like crackling lightning, primordial and primitive. It is power, pure and tangible, burdened with killer intent, and it feels like life. There is so much going on, so much filling it up. Not a bit of it is wasted or empty, and the hungry spaces inside her soul cry out to be filled by it. The hatred, pure and simple, makes that roaring, angry piece inside of her howl out for more. Her body oozes adrenaline and she has never felt more alive.

Scared, intimidated, and terrified, but *alive* .

"Woah," Ryuishi breathes out, staring up at him.

His glasses covered eyes bore into hers and she remembers how to breathe again, her brain stuttering back to life.

"I was near the border, appreciating life's wonders
When I got ambushed by a group of Iwa bounty hunters
Tried to bail and get them off my tail to no avail
Ended up having to impale those pesky male's
Must have crossed the border
Tryin' to restore my life's order
But now those fools are deep in the ocean
No way they can start another commotion
Now the world famous Killer Bee
Is standing here right in front of me
And I can promise that I don't want any trouble
Because I'm pretty sure he can smash me into rubble
I can leave as soon as you need

It's your words that I will heed," she tells him, and man, this shit is tricky. Her rapping game is getting weaker as time goes on. She was having trouble mixing truth and lie in that statement. More than likely, the jinchuriki was here to deal with the bounty hunters as well, and they could have been crossing the border back and forth going after her trail, for all he knows. It's a plausible story, if not a truthful one. She just feels there's no need to mention why she is actually here when a golden opportunity is being handed to her on a silver platter. She has the one tails and the nine tails, why not add the eight tails?

The man above looks contemplative, staring down at her, and she waits in the silence, feeling the energizing wash of his chakra against her, fidgeting in the water. She doesn't know what the twenty-two

year old sees when he looks at her, but when he reaches down a hand she holds her breath praying that he's not about to murder her.

She grabs his hand, and he helps pull her out of the water.

AN: AH! Still on traveling, but I have found some time to upload. So yah! Killer B! Sorta rap battle! More important word building! All of the things happening! Sorta odd, I know, but still, I said it was a weird arc. That being said, a lot of you are shipping Ryuishi, and I tried to make that a parody here. I'm still uncertain if I want to do romance, and there's no plans for it right now. Fluff? Yes. Sexuality? Yes. Other relationships? Yes. Romance? me why I should and I might give it a shot.

I apologize to those who reviewed my work without reply, but I'm hella busy right now. I will attempt to get to them later.

A BIG thank you to my readers, reviewers, favoriters, and followers. I love you. Marry me.

THE BIGGEST THANK YOU to my beta enbi. They're the best.

Chapter question: If Ryuishi was reborn into another fandom what would it be and what would she do?

Meeting a Loaded Relization

I do not own Naruto. Or Death Cab for Cutie.

Killer Bee escorts her all the way back to the border, and his actions throw her for a loop.

It takes two days from where they're at, and the whole time she keeps waiting for the other shoe to drop. Her muscles are sore from being so tense, constantly waiting for him to attack her, for him to stab or slice or maim.

But he doesn't.

He raps and rhymes and does his duty without being cruel, escorting a criminal out of his country. Kumo has no alliance with Kiri, and somewhere she knows that they actually kind of dislike each other, so his actions are surprising to see. Bee is professionally doing his job without vigor or malice, and he is treating her like a person instead of a piece of scum. He might even be a little bit friendly.

The act of him showing her mercy by staying his hand absolutely appalls her.

Ryuishi knows she's fucked up, knows she isn't right, but it's never been shoved in her face like this before. When he leans in to stoke the fire at night, she recoils like he's reaching out to strike her. When he speaks instead of shouting, she is unsettled because she is so ready for more bad news, more responsibility, more stress. She doesn't sleep because she keeps waiting for him to end her, and when he compliments her roast mountain hen, she feels dread settling in her gut, even though she knows he's not lying.

Killer Bee is courteous and capable, and he isn't rude. Other than the minnow comment, he never insults her. He isn't out for her blood,

isn't interested in her abilities. He doesn't care what she's done and doesn't throw himself at her with a fanatical devotion. He doesn't look to her for guidance or care. He treats her like he would any other person, and she doesn't know what to do about it.

When she crosses the border and leaves his sight, she is overwhelmed with something she might call bitterness.

How much has this world fucked her up? At what point did she expect every physical interaction to lead to pain? When did she start anticipating every word to be a tease, taunt, insult or baseless compliment? How come she was surprised when conflict didn't arise? Why was she so uneasy when he treated her like a normal human being?

Ryuishi ruminates all the way to her home, and is still bewildered when she reaches the sandy beach. How long has she spent without a friend now? Five, six years? Her sixteenth birthday just passed not too long ago, so six years. Six years of wandering without her boys by her side. Six years she has spent traveling alone, only to return to an empty house.

The teenager plops down in her empty living room and shoves her face in her hands, an overwhelming feeling of isolation washing over her.

She tries to think of Gaara and Naruto and how much she cares for them, but realizes that she is, to them, role model of sorts. Sure, they ease the ache a bit, but she isn't herself with them, not truly. She is happy to be Aneue and Nee-san, but she is rose colored and haloed in their eyes, not the gritty person she really is. To Orochimaru and Kagami, she is a business partner, capable and intuitive, helping them help themselves. To the Mumei, she is some distant being, divine and placed on a pedestal.

True, these are all pieces of herself, and they are all important bonds in their own right. She has to give credit where credit is due, after all.

They are important social structures, and she loves them all in their own way, but they are... well, it's hard to explain.

She belatedly realizes that the only ones who ever saw her in her entirety, from cold and ruthless to loving and kind, were Kisame and Zabuza. They saw her weep and cry and rage and shout. They saw her in the mornings, untidy and groggy, and before missions with crisp war paint and well-kept hair. They saw her joking and angry and everything in between, and they were her world.

She huffs out a bewildered, slightly hysterical laugh. She doesn't have that anymore. She has no peers, no comrades or besties. She doesn't have somebody who she can just talk to or hang out with, without expectations. She hasn't had one for six years.

She unpins her hair and drags her fingers through it, laughing again. Weird, it's so weird to think that her only experiences with people have been the fucked up shenanigans she has going on right now. Fellow plotters, fanatical followers, two five year olds, and people who literally want to kill her. That's the people she's been meeting all this time.

She briefly entertains the notion that if anyone from her past life saw her now, knowing the things she's done... well, they might not recognize her. Then she thinks on it again, about how her old best friend had always been there to temper her more erratic and cold behavior. How glancing at her sister could quell her violent urges and how talking with her family tamed her more ruthless side. And then she thinks that maybe they would recognize her after all, and it is both comforting and painful to know that she has always had the capability to be this kind of person.

Ryuishi shakes her head, clearing out the thoughts inside. There's no point in dwelling on it. It's not like she can go out and pick a friend up, it just doesn't happen like that. She gets up, tosses her bag on the counter, and trudges to her shower, intent on catching up on her tanning. She's getting lines where the halter-neck crop top wraps around the back of her neck and ribs. That just won't do; she hates

tan lines. She spends her week off alternating between sunning naked on the beach and stocking up on provisions, letting her mind wander and her emotions calm.

A week later, Ryuishi finds herself on the streets of Suna, lazing around with her giant fucking basket, hair trailing free in the desert wind. The thing is, she forgot how much trouble long hair is to wear down. The long black locks-an island girl mix of wave and loose curl that looked so great in the mirror this morning-are full of fucking sand. It keeps brushing the sides of her cheeks and getting motherfucking everywhere.

She's glad she decided against the vivid blue sarong. In her hotel room, she had thought of all the scars crossing her shins and thighs, a clear giveaway of a hard life. Now she is certain that the airy fabric would have somehow blown wide open, giving the people of Sunagakure a free view of her killer matching undergarments. Even though modesty is a foreign concept to her, she thinks it might have scared away customers and maybe traumatized the elders in the crowd.

It isn't right away this time, and she sells a little over half of her basket, but eventually a small redheaded child is clinging to her leg. There is no babbling this time, or tears, just a flicker of joy lighting up his face before he's clinging to her like she never left.

It's surprising that he found her so quick though, because it's only been about half a day since she got here. She supposes that she is one of the more kindly regarded merchants, and word of her arrival must travel through the ranks of children like wildfire. The candy lady who has the best goods for reasonable prices, a known sucker for cute faces.

Maybe, in another life, they would have hated her for accompanying Gaara, but here they simply expound upon the lie she gave them when she first came to the village. The whole village knows of the

young trader who lost her brothers in the war. If they see her trying to replace them with him, it is none of their business.

That being said, there has been consequences. The last time she came here, she had her room searched by turban-wearing ANBU, probably while she was out playing with their castaway prince. She could smell them on her things, the faint stench of metal and dust. A civilian would have never known, but she is far too used to her scent not to have recognized it. Obviously, they found nothing, or she would be dead.

There are certain feelers being sent out to her alias as well, but her false paperwork is excellent. The owner of the candy company in the Land of Rivers who wore a necklace of feathers guaranteed she was an employee, and the bribes to make her fake records paid off when they searched for registration numbers and birth certificates. To any undercover agents, she checks out one hundred percent as a war orphan and legitimate merchant.

It's like she said before: paper trails are easy to create in this world, at least compared to her old one. Plus, the fact that a few other traders followed her lead have made her a valuable asset to the village economy as well. The trader's pool is larger than it once was after the war, but small enough to hear if one goes missing. They kill her, and they scare off any hope of recovering from their severe economic depression by scaring off the ones that follow. Besides, she's supposedly a civilian, and the jinchuuriki can handle himself, to their knowledge.

It's not like anyone would miss her if she went missing anyways. Maybe the Mumei would start a war, but she doesn't think they would get very far as they are now. Orochimaru would probably miss her in the way one misses a close pet, and Kagami would probably sigh and take over her position, but other than that? It's been six fucking years since she saw her boys, and there hasn't been so much as an errant rumor. Her family is a literal world away. Gaara and Naruto would turn out fine, just like in the manga and anime. She's adrift without an anchor, and just, fuck everybody else. Fuck them for only

seeing the missing-nin, or the Lucky Dragon. Fuck them for fucking her over.

Again, she shoves the thoughts out of her head. Seriously, what is up with her lately? She's all emotional and bitter and shit. She thinks she might be getting stress sick, because her throat itches like a motherfucker.

Ryuishi stares down at the bowl in front of her, then blinks and looks around, spotting Gaara glued to her side. Somehow, she went into deep thought mode and blanked out a little, only superficially aware of the world around her. Well shit. That means her and Gaara have been walking around all day in silence, which is both awkward and weird.

"Ah..." she starts, attempting to make some sort of conversation. Only, she can't really think of anything to say to a four year old. She's fresh out of kid-friendly topics, and her head still feels sort of empty. She's sure that if someone attacked, she would be able to whoop ass, but here and now, she doesn't know what the fuck is going on.

She looks over and sea foam green eyes stare up at her, silently assessing.

"What time is it?" she asks the now five year old. The domed, boob-like buildings don't have windows most of the time, and she has been zoning out. Don't judge her, it fucking happens.

"Sunset," he answers.

"Ah," she replies, "I guess I've been pretty quiet. Sorry, I lost track of time."

Gaara looks at her then, really looks. His stoic face is pretty good this time, calm and impassive. His spicy stew is almost gone, and that's weird because she isn't hungry for once and hers is almost full.

The boy reaches out a hand, and it takes her a moment before she figures out why. His fingers stretch and graze over a burn on the back of her wrist, a gift from one of the bounty hunters. The grainy yet smooth texture of his shield feels weird on the wound.

He notices these things. Even though some people call him a child, and even more people call him a monster. He sees Aneue, and how sometimes how loud sounds make her jump, and how she doesn't like to be touched from behind. He hasn't seen her like this though, and it scares him a little. She's quiet, and she's been quiet all day, moving like a puppet on the end of chakra strings. Her face is like that of the adults around here, like the time she stood over him after she made him bite his tongue. It's closed off, quiet and still in a way that Aneue's face shouldn't be. She should be laughing and using bad words and carrying him, talking about things that don't make sense. She should be eating her food really super fast, spilling a little bit and getting it on her cheek like she always done.

Only... she just ate a few bites, and she's staring at the wall in front of them. But she doesn't look like she's seeing a wall. She looks sad and angry and alone, but she isn't, because he is here with her. He looks at her hand, the one that's been bothering him all day. It has an open burn on it, and it looks ugly and raw, like a giant blister that popped. He can smell medicine on it, like the kind they give out at the store. It must hurt, and he knows that now, what hurt is. It isn't good, but she's not saying anything about it, like she's used to things hurting. It can be explained away easily enough. She's a candy merchant, and it wouldn't be hard to believe that a batch of melted sugar got a little out of control. Civilians get hurt all the time too.

But his belly is squirming in a funny way, and he thinks that his Aneue is only one person. He hasn't seen anyone come in with her, or leave with her. The roads can be dangerous, and she's pretty. Father and Uncle said that pretty girls can get hurt in special ways, and he knows that bandits sometimes prowl the sands outside his home. The roads can be dangerous. Who protects Aneue? She told him her family is gone, so she doesn't have an uncle to help her.

Suddenly, he feels the urge to do it. Aneue is his. All his. She belongs to him, and he can protect her. He isn't a shinobi yet, but he's learning, and he's still stronger than a civilian anyways.

The thing inside him grumbles, and he hears something that is almost like whispers. It doesn't like her, because she feels hollow and unnatural, but it agrees that they own this one. If they own it then it can't be used against them, and they can keep it away from others.

Yet, Aneue is like the wind. She can't be kept in one place, she has to move around and travel. He knows he can't keep her, is scared to find out what would happen if he tried.

But. But, but, but-

He needs to know what happens out there, so maybe he can help.

"What happens when you're not here?" he asks.

She doesn't feel like lying right now, so instead she looks him in the eye and smiles a tired smile.

"Want to watch the stars together tonight?"

Gaara picks out the spot, leading her by the hand to a building he can climb up with ease. But she can't do the same. Not while cloth-masked Anbu watch them from the darkness, eyes glued to her, watching her for a sign. Just one slip up, just one mistake, and they pounce.

Gaara gets it eventually and makes her a seat of sand to bring her up with, and she take a moment to really appreciate it. No acting, now, it's truly fucking amazing to float above the world on a chariot made of a million shifting particles. It's like, the world's craziest hanging chair.

"Holy shit, Gaara! This is awesome!" she cries from her perch, and the boy looks delighted with her praise. It rises higher and higher until they reach the summit, a flat area carved into the top of one of the domes with a view that takes her breath away. The desert is painted with color in the twilight hour, and even without her glasses, the sprawling expanse of Suna leaves her breathless.

The last golden-red of the sun sinks below the horizon, and it permeates into soft magenta and brilliant indigo in the sky around them. Insubstantial wisps of clouds stretch thin like gossamer cloth, weaving around the sky. For a moment she forgets her grumpy worries and she laughs, loud and bright, picking Gaara up in her arms and hugging him tight.

"It's beautiful!" she tells him sincerely, peppering his face with kisses. The stoic face leaves, replaced by something that looks like unbearable smugness. "This will be a great place to see the stars, but are you sure you won't get in trouble?" she asks, just loud enough for other people to hear.

Gaara shakes his head no, and his eyes dart quickly to the most obvious ANBU's spot. She pretends not to notice the action, or any of the watchers themselves.

"Father and Uncle will know where I am," he says, just as loudly as her.

"Alright. I just don't want anything bad to happen."

The little boy nods and grips tightly onto her loose hair, and to be honest, it hurts a little bit. But it's okay, Ryuishi's had worse hurts, and she's going to have even more. There's no problem with giving Gaara some leeway.

Her heart beats softly in her chest, and the faint smell of cardamom and dust wafts off of him, clinging tightly to the inside of her nose. She used to question why her nose worked so well, in this life and her past, and pegged it down to her poor eyesight. Some people got

a little bit better hearing, she got a better sniffer. It probably wouldn't hold up in an actual, honest-to-god scientific experiment to prove it, and is most likely her just posturing. But the fact remains that she's sensitive to smells, and it's why she likes to surround herself with calming, deep scents. She inhaled enough rot, death, decay, blood, piss, shit and vomit on the front lines. Sometimes she can even smell the faint traces of irony, salty blood soaked into her skin. She doesn't want to though, so she lets Gaara pull her away from the dark places her mind is heading, and into the now. Little by little, he brings her back to where she needs to be.

"Thank you," she whispers, and he nods against her shoulder like he understands. Maybe he does, and maybe why that's why he doesn't push like Naruto.

She plops down on her butt, letting Gaara rearrange himself until her is cradled against her, his little body resting against her chest, his head under her neck. It's cute and cuddly, and the kid radiates heat like a motherfucker, so when the temperature outside drops, hers doesn't.

Gaara says nothing when when her ice cold arms wrap around him or when she rests her chin on his head, so she keeps them there as stars begin to twinkle into life, color draining out of the sky like water out of a sink. The wind is still as crazy as ever, whipping her hair out like tangled tentacles behind her, and she can hear the sound of everything in the vicinity being sand blasted to hell. The scrape of silica is accompanied by the sound of howling as the air rushes through the canyons and streets below.

"Will you sing?" comes his voice.

"Uhhh..." she answers. It's one thing to croon playfully or sing under her breath for the kids, but with ANBU so near, she's a little bit leery. Not that ANBU haven't heard it before, but still, having an audience gives her a tiny bit of stage fright. She's a teenager again, what if her voice cracks? Does she know any appropriate songs, or is it all bullshit?

"Please?" he asks, and she breaks because he's such a cute fucker. He really did her a solid, sticking with her, and she *is* one for rewarding good behavior.

She sighs and clicks her tongue, looking out over the landscape. "You want any one in particular?" she asks, and then immediately regrets. What happens if he chooses Fergalicious, or Party Rock?

"The one that goes like," and here he hums a few notes. Ah, well, at least it's not bad. Not much wrong with Death Cab for Cutie's 'I'll follow you into the dark'.

Still, she coughs a bit, like she's clearing her throat before she starts. She's a little self conscious, but the ANBU can go suck a dick. Or a clit. Or whatever their preference is, she really doesn't care, but also she totally does. Ugh, her head is a confusing place.

" Love of mine, someday you will die

But I'll be close behind

I'll follow you into the dark

No blinding light or tunnels to gates of white

Just our hands clasped so tight,

waiting for the hint of a spark ."

Gaara nods and his eyes go heavy lidded. She's pretty sure he can't sleep, and but he is... dozing? Maybe dozing is the right word. Whatever it is, he's tiny and secure in her arms. Even though she might be feeling shitty, the tiny, trusting child leaning into her gives her no choice but to step up.

Above them, silver pinpricks of light shine through the darkness, and she focuses on them instead of the emptiness that stretches out forever between them. The light of a half moon shines down, and the world is painted in silvery white and grey. The desert landscape

seems to glow. It's sorta magical, she thinks, tucking her legs up into a crossed position and wrapping herself around the child in her arms like a shield.

Her dark hair spills around them as the wind dies down a bit, heavy like a scented shroud on her back and tumbling down around the child, and she imagines she might look a bit crazy, huddled around a child who can't sleep, singing him songs from a world away, but it's nice and it's calm, so she doesn't care too much.

Ryuishi clings to him like the anchor he is. When she has to be the person he needs, her heart feels fuller. She always did have a problem being protective.

AN: Tuh duh! So, lots of stuff going on. I got a lot of complaints calling for suspension of belief when I said that the two kids were not watched like hawks. Which, in my mind, is sorta BS. SO much crazy shit happens to them in the manga and anime that would have no chance of happening if they were watched, and also, I already explained how Ryuishi was getting around security. I would also prefer that if you have criticisms, that you PM or leave a message I can respond to so we can talk about it rather than going 'It's all Mary sue' and gallivanting into the abyss. Honestly, if real shit is going down, I want to fix it, so you have to help me fix it. SPEAK TO ME.

That being said, we have the start of an arc within an arc here, so, feels ahoy. Also, WE MADE 1000 favorites, follows and reviews! AHHHHHH! THANK YOU!

I would like to thank all my reviewers, favoriters, followers and lurkers! I hope you find money on the ground.

I want to thank my lovely beta Enbi, who helps me so much it's crazy. Like, just bananas.

Question: What do you nonsense do you see Ryuishi getting into if she had stuck around and lived with under Orochimaru's close(er) personal care? OR What do you think would have happened if Ryuishi chose to become a honeypot instead of a assault fighter?

Meeting Rash Decisions

I do not own Naruto.

The week with Gaara passes too soon, and she is fiercely dependent on him the whole time. By the end, she is looking for him almost constantly and thinking about breaking routine just so she can stay with him just a bit longer.

It's for that exact reason she knows she has to go.

Gaara is a child, and she is a fucking adult. There is no reason at all to make him a tool for fixing her own personal problems. It's wrong to try and make a kid try and fill the void inside of her, and she fucking knows that. A kid can maybe help ease the symptoms, but it's not his job to fix her. In fact, it's her job to try and help fix him. That's why she came here in the first place, to help him have a happier life. So the fact that she's trying to make it about herself pisses her off beyond belief.

She can't be reliant on other people for happiness. That's something she has to be responsible for by herself, not push onto a motherfucking little boy.

The anger inside of her is growing, and for the first time in a very long time, she feels the howling beast of rage inside her head begin to act up. Now, it's not really a surprise, because sometimes it would chime in occasionally, driving her into small fits or whispering ideas inside her head-like the time she wanted to quiet Misaki, or the panic she felt trying to fight off the ANBU. It is different though, because now it is the same constant white noise she remembers living with in the Mist. The same kind that made her such a ruthless monster on the front lines, tearing out eyes and recklessly dismembering people like an animal.

It's a tenseness in her limbs, her muscles coiled tight with stress and irritation. It is the feeling of her skin stretched like that of a drum, the feeling of her surroundings closing in on her, caging her. It shows itself through a nervous tic that is restless for violence and bloodshed, causing her to chew gum near constantly in a desperate attempt to not begin smoking again. When she is alone, she paces constantly, back and forth, trying to count her breaths.

Seven in, hold four, seven out. Just like old times.

If she's honest, the anger itself is just a side effect of something deeper. She knows its name, knows the familiar taste of it on her tongue. She is almost intimate with the way hopelessness and rage intermingle inside her head, causing her to choke on something in her throat that isn't actually there.

It's called desperation.

The thing is, she knows everything is going well, even better than well, on an intellectual level. It's actually more than she could have ever hoped for, the power she wields and the titles she holds. Ryuishi's doing great in that respect, or at least, she knows she should be. Only, her fucking goddamn emotions won't get on board with logical thought and she hates it, because it makes no fucking sense. It should be easy to get rid of because it doesn't make sense, and it should just go the fuck away, but that's not how humans work. That's not how mental illness works.

She can't just wish it away, or harness the power of her fucking will to banish it from her mind, one logical step at a time. There is no bulleted list of pros and cons that she can make that will help her out. It's not so fucking tidy. There is only the crawling, steady roller coaster that works like a fucked up, off-rhythm clockwork machine driving her up and down and around and around. It pulls on the pieces in her head, twisting them so that the separate parts don't harmonize, instead going off on different tangents that are a jumbled mess. There is the constant need for movement and the inability to pay attention to one thing at a time, instead leaping all over the place

like a coked-up cricket hop hop hopping away. A nervous, incensed energy coursing through her body, pulling every string taut and making her fucking itch to wreck something and maybe cry. So she fucking hates it, because it's easier to use anger and almost impossible to control depression.

That's why she lets go of Gaara, heading out the gates with a goodbye kiss to the forehead. She goes because even though he's an outlet, he's not a healthy one, not for either one of them. Even though she doesn't know it, he watches her go with something like worry in his heart, because Aneue isn't right, she isn't acting normal, for the given parameters of her normal behavior. Her skin was hot under his hands, and he heard something wet when he laid his head on her chest and listened to her breath.

Ryuishi travels a day and a night without stopping and is ridiculously paranoid the whole time, filled with chaotic energy, before crashing and burning like a fucking wreck in a safe house near the border. She goes to sleep and thoughts of utter and complete bullshit fill her head, but she can't stop them this time.

She wakes up halfway through the night gasping for air in the midst of an attack, a nightmare memory flashing through her mind, a swirling mess of images blazing before her. Zabuza dragging his blade through her flesh at the Academy graduation, Kisame's sword aiming for her heart as she begs him not to fight, her family's loud voices arguing, her sister's smiling face-they all mix and clash with the sound of bullets in alleyways and exploding tags rending the night air. She gasps and curls up in a ball, and she ignores a coughing fit, thinking about the numbers and timelines a little bit deliriously.

Six years since she has seen or heard from her boys. Six years since she has heard them laugh and made them dinner. Six years since she saw Keiko dead, smashed like rotten fruit on the ground. Sixteen years since she saw her family, laughing and arguing and alive. Sixteen years since she felt her mother kiss her cheek and her

father's bear hug. Sixteen years since she last went camping with her little sister, curled tight next to her in the tent.

Something stings her eyes and claws at her throat, but it isn't a cough this time, no, it is that same lump of desperation. Or maybe vomit. Whatever.

She breathes an unsteady breath out, and she turns it into rage.

Fuck Kisame, he literally fucking tried to kill her, the douchebag. Fuck Zabuza, who scarred her for life, the inconsiderate prick. Fuck them for not trying to find her, they fucking suck. Fuck this world for existing, and fuck just everything. Like, all the things.

Why the hell is it so hot in here?

Ryuishi closes her eyes and feels some sweat trickle down her brow. She wishes Orochimaru was here, because he would know what the hell was going on. He's good with iryo-ninjutsu and at calming her down. Now that she thinks of it, fuck him too for gallivanting with a bunch of straight up butthurt honkies in Ame.

She falls into a light slumber. This time she dreams of punching everyone in the face until they bleed. Then she wakes up again, and the sun is bright and she feels a little bit better. Just to be safe, she goes out and buys some cold medicine and eats a big bowl of River Country's infamous boat soup to eat before taking it. The day is overcast and threatening rain, but she feels better and a little bit calmer after last night's gratifying sleep.

Ryuishi takes it slow, winding around the great cypress-like trees of the land, and her footsteps are steady and calm. She decides to take the seaside paths instead of heading north up to Grass Country this time, adding to the distance but also giving her the ability to check out some familiar terrain. She never expects it to bite her in the ass quite as hard as it does.

It does start raining, the day after the first, and she eats some more soup at a stall and takes another pill. The overcast skies are awesome, and the rain only makes her a little upset because she knows her hair will frizz later. There's no thunder or lightning, just a heavy downpour as she travels the coasts. She's totally fine; she's just traveling quietly and unobtrusively by herself, attempting to keep her shit together and watching as evergreens and oaks blend into the cypress and grassland. Then... well then, she's not.

Because as she's slinking through the trees, winding around branches and concealing her chakra, she stumbles over something that really, truly, has no reason to be happening.

Ryuishi thinks that it's none of her business, and that she should just leave. The cloaked figure that is surrounded has nothing to do with her, and she has nothing to do with him, nothing at all. Only she does, because she knows that mask. It's the same mask that chased her out of Konoha, and this time, there isn't a partner by his side.

She's hidden, crouched far above them, and nobody seems to notice her, but she notices them. Ryuishi knows the shape of those four lines on the masks of those surrounding the local ANBU, knows the style of dress and the style of swords on their person, knows it because she has been running from them for years. Her heart thuds, and she can't tell you why. She can't tell you a lot of stuff right now, it's all very sudden. There's hunter-nin from Kiri inside of the Land of Fire, and they're surrounding Hatake Kakashi, who is for some reason all alone. That's all she can say.

(What she doesn't know is that the hunter-nin have been pushing borders for a while now, desperately taking on jobs to keep the village above water since its destruction. What she doesn't know is that they've been doubling as bounty hunters, attempting to collect cash in any way possible, and that the Copy Ninja has a ridiculous figure above his head. She has no clue that this never happened in canon, and would have never happened if not for her.)

Hiding in a tree, listening to the white noise of rain drops flooding through canopy, she is frozen. She is still as she watches, hoping that maybe it's a legit business transaction, even though she knows it's not. They would not be surrounding him like that if it was, and the humming of tension-filled chakra wouldn't be drowning out her senses. The swords would not be gleaming in the light of day, and, and-

Her brain is dead, and she can't think, because this is the most set-up shit she could ever imagine. As she watches, somebody goes to gut the man with a tachi, and when he dodges, the person behind him smashes their fist into his kidney, and he keeps trying, keeps moving and all that wild, angry energy bubbles under her skin without a release.

This is the character she grew up with as a kid. This is the man she flashed her tits to. This is the dude she carried home, drunk and sad and alone. She doesn't know who he is, at his core, but she knows his story to a point, and he's not a terrible person. In fact, he's like, a billion times more noble than her. He looks like steel to some, whole and together, but all she can see is shattered glass. She knows broken because she is broken, and broken isn't bad. Broken doesn't deserve this, to be alone and forsaken at some distant border. Broken can do better, broken can be fixed.

Before she can think it through, she's offering the metaphorical hand, from one shattered, jagged piece of a person to another.

Ryuishi does the only thing she knows will garner a Mist-nin's ultimate and complete attention. She whistles, high and sharp and loud. It's the same whistle that she let out the night she changed her life, the same sound that ran through the streets of Kiri as it burned. Sure enough, ten blank, slit-eyed masks jerk and stare up at her in unison. She swallows nervously and forces a mean smile on her face, her lips twisting up, and she bares her teeth. The rain pours down around them, and the clearing is stock-still as she fumbles for something to drag them away from the man standing in the center of them.

Her hands are shaking and her skin is feverish, but she pushes it down and thinks, plans and schemes flitting through her head like sand through an hourglass. She's drawing blank, because all she feels is that energy, that desperation turned into hate. It fills her up, and before she knows what she's saying, she is projecting it onto the hunter-nin, onto the symbol of her old village.

"Recognize me, you shitstains?" she spits. "You *rotten little fuckers* . I knew Kiri was fucking trash, but ten on one is a little fucking much, you miserable little dicks." One of the ninja bristles, and she presses her smile wider, feeling it stretch across her cheeks.

"I burned your damn village down hoping you'd learn not to be such cocksuckers, but instead it looks like you banded together to become an enormous group of useless scum. Like a fungus or a disease," she continues. The canine masked ANBU in the center tenses, but no one notices but her. *Good*, she thinks. Good, she can do this, she can pull through.

"Now, here we are. I thought I killed enough people that maybe the next bunch would be stronger, but apparently it takes ten of them to take out one little Leaf-nin. Should I go back and do it again, now that I'm not a child? How many do you think I can get this time? Maybe I can drag over the leftovers and take the rest of the bloodline users that the Mizukage missed in his genocide and make them disappear as well. Should I get a start on the shinobi families? I bet their friends have some real interesting stories they're just *dying* to tell."

One near the furthest edge of the circle is nearly vibrating with anger and the rest look livid, which means her babbling has worked as she has planned. Awesome. She leans down a little bit, and they tense harder. The wet hair on either side of her face dangles like a lure.

Time to reel them in.

"Can you catch a dragon?" she asks, and then she flips and her world goes spinning.

She can literally feel a kunai miss her by inches, and the hunter-nin aren't bothering to hide themselves or the sound of their steps. She can hear them following as she lands and takes off towards the nearest stretch of water. All around her, fog begins to fill the air, and she flashes back to a time where she was running through her friend's jutsu, avoiding his attacks. Her body tenses and her steps are silent as she draws her weapon from the pant leg of her outfit. Adrenaline floods her system and she pushes herself to go as fast as she can go.

A sword pokes out of the mist, going for her liver, and she twists around like a snake. Her hands arc up and over her head, landing on the back of the sword, and she forces the blade down as her feet fly up and over before crashing into the wielder's face and throat. The chakra-coated limbs surge with power, and she uses it to deadly ends, crushing down a windpipe and punching through a skull. The sword and corpse follow the rain down to tumble to the earth below.

She is a taijutsu expert who faced the front lines of the Third Shinobi War, and her unit held two Swordsmen of the Mist in the making. *They should have remembered .*

She lets the move carry her down, arm outstretched to catch a branch and flip forward. A hail of water bullets speed towards her and she twists up, sailing through the air to avoid them. But she misses one that is coming from the opposite direction, and then even more follow. A few are so powerful that they punch right through the muscles in her right thigh. It hurts like a motherfucker, and she wasn't even aware that jutsu could be overpowered to such an extent.

It really hammers in the fact that she just pissed off a squad of ridiculously skilled and strong individuals that were trained in the art of killing ridiculously skilled and strong individuals. If she felt a little less dizzy, she might have even regretted the fact that it was all to save one poor schmuck. Ten on one is shit odds, she thinks, but she has knowledge Kakashi doesn't. She knows their styles, their tools, their methods. These were her people, years ago. They were the

ones that trained her up to be like them. This is a fight against monsters blanketed in banks of mist, and a fellow monster has a better chance of winning than a leaf. Fire is weak against water, and lightning can only be amplified by the wave.

Still not great odds though, she thinks as she uses the velocity of her spinning body to whip the end of her meteor hammer towards the direction the first jutsu came from. She has a very, very high chance of dying, but it is still lower than his. Konoha-nin rely on teams, that is the source of their strength. Without one, he is not as effective as he could be. Kiri-nin, however, rely on being cunning, sneaky bastards with a viciousness that goes unrivaled among the Elemental Countries. Sometimes they band together, but they always learn to fight alone first.

Ryuishi's been fighting alone for a long time now, and she is just as vicious and twice as cunning as the people chasing her.

The bladed end of her chain meets something hard, and she draws it back immediately, finally touching down for a second. Her right leg screams in agony and quivers under the pressure of landing. She can't help the warbling, growling sound that escapes her lips.

"An traitor and an animal," a nasally voice spits, "Just like that unit leader of yours."

Ryuishi stills and grinds her teeth, listening for any motion, trying to expand her senses through a feat of fucking magic or something. Whatever. Her dark eyes narrow, even though she knows it won't help.

"You shut your shitty little mouth. What damn disgrace talks about a fellow shinobi like that? Thought the village was all about unity among the ruling class," she hisses, hearing the sound of lapping water. A lake. There's a lake nearby, probably not more than a hundred yards from her position, only she has no idea what's in that hundred yards. There could be opponents, or traps, or any manner of things.

"Hoshigaki is about as loyal as you are, you tramp. Gone like the wind, teacher dead, the great sword missing," the voice answers back. She sucks in a breath, panic beating in her heart. She's not in the place to deal with this, mentally or physically. It's psychological warfare. They're pushing her buttons, just like she pressed theirs in the clearing. She knows what their goal is, and why it shouldn't be working. The problem is that it doesn't stop it from doing exactly that.

Her throat aches, and her eyes sting. How long? How long ago did he leave? Is he coming back? It's not hard. It's not hard at all. All he has to do is find the children of the red light and show them his necklace. She left the trail for them, for those two. How long has it been? It's so easy, isn't he trying? That slimy, dirty bastard! Where is he? She *needs* him. WHERE IS HE?

It's hard to ignore the whispers that the way it was described is like what happened in canon. It's impossible to stop the image of a red cloud against black fabric.

"Shut. Up. You *slimy* sack of crap," she bites out.

"What? Haven't seen him around yet? We were all sure the Kaijuu had sworn an oath to do the Ningyo in. Well, him or the Demon, the only loyal one of you monsters. Maybe we'll find them after we finish up with you, and they can have the pieces."

Her breathing gets harder and becomes uneven. What is he saying?

"No, it will all have to go to Momochi-san. The treacherous shark has been missing for months, and it would be more than you're worth to track him down."

It never occurs to her that the nin might be lying, or that Kisame might not hate her. It never even seems likely he's hiding lie inside truth, just like she does. Because Kisame is gone, and he swore an oath. Later she might think about what oath exactly, but now it doesn't even register. *Months*. Kisame defected *months* ago and he never sought her out. Never called for her, never spread the word.

He never came and he hates her, he fucking hates her and she doesn't- she can't-

Ryuishi's screaming before she registers the sound, but when she does it's awful, mind wrenching and horrible. Her broken, husky voice makes her scream sound like the howl of a beast, warbling between ear-shatteringly high and tapering down into heart stopping low. She feels everything inside her heart shatter as the betrayal lingers. She tastes blood and bile in the back of her mouth. The air around her ripples and she hears the rushing sound of water in her ears, feels the cold depths of the Void squirming outside her skin, escaping and devouring. Hungry, so hungry. Nothing compares to her current state. It hurts, it hurts so bad, like losing her family all over again. She loves him, and he *hates* her. He's never coming back, and she's alone, and the sadness crawls up her throat side by side with the scream. They mix with the hollow death inside her veins, creating an awful desperation.

She turns it into rage. Another piece takes the wheel and she slips away inside herself, letting herself feel nothing but that cold, numb, useful rage.

She is going to rip them to pieces. She is going to tear them limb from limb and wipe every evidence of their existence from the earth. She is going to continue with her plans. Hatake is going to survive. Zabuza is going to survive. Kisame is going survive, whether he likes it or not. Gaara is going to survive. Naruto is going to survive.

The only people who aren't are hiding in the mist around her.

She cries out again, and this time, the hunter nin shiver as they see her and the rising mass of water she is forming around herself. The mist coalesces and joins with the snaking form of lake water. Some places on her become hard to look at as something that feels unnatural hums in the air.

It feels like death.

For them, it is.

AN: The plot thickens. For those that see plot holes or think this is some heavy coincidence, things will be explained! Stuff is happening! That being said, I also wanted to show that even though she is much better than she was, mental illness is not a thing that goes away. She is still coping with it. Trauma's are also no joke, no matter how much Ryuishi tries to spin it. We see here symptoms of not of previously stated and shown manic depressive tendencies along with some really self destructive behavior. These are all things she has displayed before if your read carefully, but I thought, just to be safe, I would state it right here in the authors notes. Ryuishi is complex and at war with herself and these are really unhealthy coping mechanisms. Also, not everything works out the way she wants it to.

That being said, hooray! Plot stuff!

I want to thank my readers. I really want to thank my favoriters, followers and reviewers. All of you keep me writing, and I love you guys.

I also want to say that my beta really helped me out with brainstorming sessions. Thank you Enbi.

Question: In the classical comedy scenario of somebody walking in on somebody else masturbating, who walks in on Ryuishi and what happens?

Meeting Fallen Enemies

I do not own Naruto.

Hatake Kakashi had believed for a very long time that what one needed when becoming a shinobi was skill, strength, intelligence, and an iron clad adherence to the shinobi rules. He used to think that following those rules to the letter was what created a great ninja. It was Obito that challenged this belief, and ultimately, it was his team that made him change it. That being said, to this day, he thought that the shinobi rules could apply to almost every situation. They were adaptable, and they fit into every mission he had ever accepted in some shape or form.

At least, until he met Watanabe Ryuishi.

The shinobi rules held no mention of what to do when a missing-nin... *exposed* herself. They never even came close to advising him on what to do when that same missing-nin brought him home and cared for him when he was stumbling drunk. There was little said about what he was supposed to do when that woman crashed through an enemy ambush that was likely to end in his capture and turned every hostile's attention away from him, painting a target on her own back. It said absolutely nothing about what to do when that same damnable, confusing, stupid girl revealed that she was a mythical figure and saved his life.

Wasn't it ironic, though? That he was the one sent out to do reconnaissance in The Land of Rivers for that exact same reason? That he was supposed to be completing a mission whose main objective centered around collecting intelligence about the growing influence of the Rakki Ryuu, and possibly discovering who or what was behind the figure? Ten days ago, if someone had told him that when he went out he would be in this situation, he would have reported them for a psyche evaluation.

Because there was no way that the same reckless girl that accused him of fathering an imaginary child and helped him as he puked was the same revolutionary icon known as the Lucky Dragon. The Lucky Dragon was the hero of the lowlifes, who whores and bandits alike respected and revered. They were the shadowy persona that had shrines built in their honor and who was said to protect and guide those in need and punish those who persecuted its people. The Lucky Dragon was said to have risen up against the tyrannical shinobi of Water Country. The Lucky Dragon who, with the help of civilians of all things, was whispered to have burned Kirigakure to ashes and hidden the refugee's all over the continent.

The Kiri no Ningyo was supposed to be a selfish, vicious child born in the Bloody Mist. She was a monstrous thing, who had a penchant for drowning her opponents underwater and tearing them apart with not only her meteor hammer, but her bare hands as well. She was supposed to show enemies the cruelest, vilest genjutsu imaginable and let her teammates rip them to shreds. She was a traitor to the village that raised her, abandoning it in the chaos of a riot, the worst of the worst. She was supposed to be the scum of the earth, the girl who betrayed her teammates when they needed her most.

He couldn't reconcile the two in his head and make them one. It just didn't make any sense. *She* didn't make any sense. All he knows is that he was given an opening, a chance to complete his mission. So he takes it. He runs, away from the confusion and the bewilderment, away from the hunter-nin who had cornered him, away from her.

Only... it's pouring rain, and he keeps wondering who will have the advantage in the fight. He knows she has Suiton jutsu and experience with two of the Seven Swordsmen. But there are ten hunter-nin, and they are the best of the best, specially trained to bring down people just like her.

Something inside of him shifts when he thinks about how the ambush was meant for him.

He can't stop thinking about how she didn't attack him when he tried to use his Sharingan on her, the first time they ever encountered each other, how she waited until he attacked to do the same. Kakashi keeps remembering the smell of saltwater, blossoms, and blood clinging to her skin as she carried him home and the feel of cool hands rubbing circles on his back as he vomited. The sound of her husky voice singing softly in an alleyway and her surly, filthy words teasing him.

Why did she watch over him when he was drunk? Why did she divert the ambush? Why does she keep doing things that looks suspiciously like caring? He curses under his breath, and the sound bounces back from the inside of his mask. He should leave her; it's a classic case of enemy nin taking out enemy nin. Whatever the result, it's good for Konoha.

The eighteen-year-old ANBU stops and bites his thumb, pressing the bloody digit against the ground. A puff of smoke emerges from the spot, and a young pug appears sitting on the ground. He'll need a better sensor to track in this weather.

"Hostile hunter-nin and one unclassified. Same chakra from the exposure incident," he orders.

"Got it, boss," the canine answers, shaking himself and standing. They take off, leaping through the trees.

He can honestly say that his behavior, while erratic, is still within mission parameters. There was a clause about making contact if possible. That's what he'll write it off as. He just needs to know-

A faint wail echoes through the air from a distance. It sounds like the husky howl of an animal, wounded and in pain. More than that, it sounds female.

Something clenches in his gut. It's too far away.

They keep at the same speed, and a rolling bank of fog begins to appear further ahead, thick and laden with chakra. Something hollow and heavy hangs in the air. There's more cries and the sound of roaring water, like a giant waterfall. All still so soft, so far away.

"Picking up blood, and lots of it," warns Pakkun. Kakashi says nothing, because he doesn't know what to say.

It takes them twenty minutes. Twenty minutes is a lifetime in a fight, it's countless exchanges of jutsu and fists. On a battlefield, it is more lives than can be counted on hands and feet. It's an eternity. They end up on a lake shore, where tree and sand meet water. Pakkun was right about the blood.

He ignores the carnage the way only an experienced front line soldier can. He walks right past the body floating facedown in the water and the missing leg. His head doesn't even turn to see the battered mess that results when a person is pummeled by thousands of pounds of water at once. There is nothing here but the mangled remnants of a massacre and the remains of a squad of hunter nin.

For a moment he thinks he is too late, and her body is among the fallen, but the sound of splashing fills his ears, followed by sobbing. Pakkun looks up at him questioningly, and he signals for the stealth approach. They move through the fog like wraiths, stepping over kunai and swords, avoiding the lingering flames of explosive tags, following the sound of mumbled curses and tears. Soft ground shifts underfoot, and he doesn't know what to expect, but it isn't what he finds.

Watanabe Ryuishi is soaked to the bone, sliding through the sand on her belly. Her right leg is bleeding heavily from her thigh and her foot looks like it has been stabbed clean through. He can hear shaking, wet-sounding breathes escape her. Her hairpin is loose, dark strands falling about her face and neck. There's a bag in front of her, and he recognizes the pack as the one she carts around. She's reaching for something inside of it, choking on angry tears, wheezing as she breathes. He notices that both her hands are shaking, and some of

her fingers are broken and twisted at unnatural angles. She may have won, but it looks like she might follow after those she just defeated.

"Where are they, where are they?" she hisses desperately, digging through the bag. One of her broken fingers catches on something he can't see, and she cries out, loud and sharp, before withdrawing her hand and cursing again. The sound of a sob escapes her and she pulls herself higher up with her shaking arms, drawing her limbs as close as they can go to her torso. Something drains out of her and she rests like that, crying and talking to herself.

"Kisame, you stupid... You were-" her breath hitches, "I need you. / *need you*, and units are supposed to stick together, you bastard-" she whispers. It takes him a moment to realize she's talking about the Tailless Beast of the Bloody Mist, her teammate. He doesn't understand, but she looks broken, and not just physically.

Years of training are telling him that this is his chance, that now is the time to take out a threat to his village. The enemy is weak and won't suspect a thing. The Kiri no Ningyo and the Rakki Ryuu can end here and now, left in the rain. There is suddenly a kunai in his hand, and he approaches. The movement draws her eyes.

She looks at him, and he thinks that the bawling girl in front of him doesn't look like an infamous kunoichi or a mythical urban legend. She looks like a person crying out for a teammate who isn't there, lonely and hurt, bleeding out in the rain.

"They were supposed to come *find* me. That was the plan," she says, and he isn't sure if it's to him or herself. "They were supposed to use what I gave them and find me, and we were gonna be a *unit* again. They were gonna be *with* me again. I *need* them and they *aren't here* ."

The words strike a little too close for comfort. The image of Obito and Rin flash inside his head, followed by the grinning face of the fourth Hokage.

"It hurts, everything hurts, and I love them. Why isn't he here?" she asks him, and he finds he doesn't have an answer for her. He doesn't know what to do, but the knife in his hand suddenly feels wrong. He's caught staring at her, his grey eye locked on coal depths with long wet lashes.

Kakashi is not the type of person who can deal with this kind of stuff. Maybe he should have kept going in the other direction?

Even as he watches she gets worse, her words eventually slurring as her body shuts down to deal with the injuries or die. Pakkun stands by his side as he watches her lose herself, babbling the same phrases, sounding lost and hurt.

I need them. I love them. Where are they? We're supposed to be a team.

He doesn't know how long it takes until she passes out, only that he stands there the whole time watching it happen. It's sad in a distant, heart wrenching kind of way.

Only when her eyes shut and she slumps over does he put the knife away and approach. He examines her and takes in swollen red eyes and tear stained cheeks, hair a mess and wounds still sluggishly bleeding out, tied hastily with scraps of cloth from her pant legs. Still, her breathing wheezes in and out.

A few quick hand signs later and there are two of him, one going for the bag, the other for the girl. His hands slide under her knees and around her shoulders and her skin feels hot to the touch. But he remembers the feel of her, how cold she was, how icy cool her hands were when he drank from the glass she steadied. She's not supposed to be warm. Her breath isn't supposed to sound wet. She's beaten and wounded and bleeding and sick to top it all off.

A sick teenage girl saved him, and he has no idea why.

He picks her up and the moisture from her sloughs off onto his cloak as her head rolls onto his shoulder. He thinks about it, thinks about how she could have killed him when he was on her back, but she carried him home and kept him from harm.

He feels like maybe he should do the same.

He looks over, and his clone has the bag secure. He nods to it before addressing his summon. "Returning to the base of operations, remain as scout," he says.

The quadruped nods in understanding, and they take off, leaping through the trees, leaving the graveyard behind them. Kakashi tries to ignore the flushed cheeks of the girl in his arms and the blood leaking down her thigh onto his arms. The awkward angles of her fingers and the hole in her foot unsettle him. He doesn't know her at all, but this figure, limp and weak in his hold, it doesn't seem like the missing-nin he has encountered before. She doesn't seem like a spirit or soldier.

How old was she when she began, he wonders. If the Bingo Books are to be believed, she left when she was eleven. She was eleven when she burned down Kiri then, but how long was she planning before that? Why did she do it in the first place?

What was it like to be hunted constantly since childhood? Where did she go when she got hurt? Who did she turn to when she needed help?

He has a slight feeling that the answer to that last one is no one at all.

He makes it farther inland, to the outpost he was originally heading to after the completion of the first part of his mission. He's not expected back for a while yet, but if he's honest, he doesn't need it. He has the Rakki Ryuu right here, and the if he needs information, she can give it. Or, well...

The clone disperses and draws him from his thoughts, her bag placed near one of the cots. Sucking in a breath, he lays her down on it and sets to work. There will be no information if the subject dies. He has no clue what to do about the illness, but he has training in emergency first aid, so he knows a thing or two about treating wounds. He goes into the storage part of the small, cabin-like safehouse, searching for the familiar feel of a sturdy white box. It takes him a moment, but he finds it eventually. He goes out and Pakkun is by the cot, paws on the edge, staring at her. His big eyes look up at him, and the dog looks grim.

"She looks bad, boss," Pakkun tells him.

"I know," he replies, going to wash his hands before opening the hard plastic case and pulling out the surgical grade utility scissors. He's going to have to treat that thigh before she bleeds out, and that means the pants have to go.

He breathes in deep for strength. He's a professional. He can do this.

It's that thought that holds him firm as he cuts through the thick black fabric, but it wavers when he spots underneath. The bronze skin is littered with a spattering of jagged scars, some right on top of each other. The worst of it is on the striking points of her shins, but the knees are covered as well, and the thighs are not bare. Looking closer, there are faint lines on her torso and arms as well. The most peculiar he notes, however, is the scar that cuts arounds her neck, like a wound from a beheading gone wrong. It goes over her vocal cords, and he wonders if that is why her voice sounds the way it does, but is hit by the sudden realization that the mark should have been a killing blow. The fact that she is alive means that it was done with cold calculation, somewhere she could be kept alive instead of on a battlefield.

Torture, his mind tells him, *captivity. Containment.*

"Holy hell," he whispers, and Pakkun lets out something like a whine in agreement. None of them look like they've been healed by an iryo-nin. It's a few years worth of cuts and puncture wounds, stitched up by hand and left on their own. He never thought before now how hard it must be for a missing nin to seek medical attention. The more faded ones make him wonder about the health care that Mist-nin get, and how many have disappeared already. Kakashi never thought he would be grateful for Konoha's medical care, but here he is.

There is still more unmarred skin than not, but he wonders how long that will remain true if she keeps it up. Was there no one to watch her back?

He recalls her words- *Where are they?* -and he flinches. No. There wasn't. He clears his head and gets back to work, detaching himself and trying to remain professional. He is a shinobi treating a prisoner with valuable information pertinent to his country, he reminds himself.

The wound on her thigh turns out to be wounds, as in multiple punctures that go deep, some with exit points, some without. He knows the water bullet jutsu, but this is something of a higher caliber. It's by sheer, stupid dumb luck that they missed her femoral. He wipes the area clean, making sure to treat every individual point. There are six in all, and getting the sluggish flow of blood to finally stop is a chore, but he manages. He wraps it in thick white gauze, not as neatly as a med nin, but well enough that it will do its job.

Kakashi moves up, cataloging identifying marks and injuries as he goes. Her ribs are bruised, and her fingers all need setting and tape. He tries not to notice the small, faint spidery scars of lightning burns that are fading as he sets them, or the high pitched whimpers from his companion.

When he flips her over, something like finality settles in his gut. There is a large, sloppy gash that looks like it might have been aiming for spine above her pelvis. But there is also a zigzagging line of puckered tissue underneath that, stretching from her hip to

underneath her underclothes to the back of her leg. Above them both is the sprawling work of pigment that reminds him of some of the earliest types of fuuinjutsu, created when the Uzumaki were a tribe and not a clan. It's primitive, but elegant. It is a sure marker that she was not lying. Serpent, feline, canine all marked in ink, in a style he cannot name. It seems foreign and alien, something straight out of the legend of the Sage of Six Paths. She really is the Rakki Ryuu.

He dresses the slash mark and turns her back over and breathes out. There is a history written out in the remnants of injuries, spread across her skin like ink on paper. He just doesn't know how to read the language.

He's not sure what to do for the illness, but he figures that wet hair can't be good, so he pulls the pin and lets the length of it drop, pulling the strands out from underneath her. A wave of perfumed odor wafts out of the previously tightly spun mass, and he guesses hair always did hold scent well. It's so long it drapes off the cot and touches the floor.

This close he can see the bags under her eyes and the soft downward slope of her mouth, even in sleep. Her skin is damp with sweat, water, and anesthetic. He has taken care of what he knows how to, and he thinks he has done the best he can.

A blanket and some restraints later, and he's finished. It's time to move on.

"You're on watch first, Pakkun," he says, leaving the holding room.

It takes sixteen hours for her to wake up, and when she does, the fever still hasn't broke. He's managed some rest and rations, but the bark of Bull pulls him away from the sharpening of kunai. He swapped the dogs out every few hours, occasionally taking watch himself, but so far it was whimpers and murmurs spoken in sleep. Until now.

He enters the room and dismisses his summon, the large canine dispersing into smoke. The missing nin is pulling against the cuffs holding her to her cot with a lethargic strength, her skin flushed and sweaty, hair tangled. Her dark eyes spot him as he enters.

"Pack," she croaks, "Pills. Metal box."

His eyes dart to the bag in the corner. She manages a mucus-laden cough.

"Bustin' my balls," she rasps, "So fuckin hot. Not time for bondage. Gonna throw up."

He still doesn't say anything, but the warning is accompanied by a dry heave, so he takes it pretty seriously. The next moment finds him dragging the pack and a trash can over to her. She can't quite manage to get up enough to lean fully over, but she does twist in a way that looks painful to get her face near the edge.

"Chakra locked. UghhHHH" she pants, followed by retching. The sharp tang of bile pierces his nose, followed by the wet slap of liquid against plastic.

"Open it," he demands, thrusting the bag near her wrapped fingers. Her wrist scrapes under the manacle binding her, and her hand is still shaking. She somehow manages to grasp the clasp in her hand and he hears the sharp pop of something disengaging inside the rucksack. He flips the top flap open and, wary of traps, gently spills the whole thing on the ground. No senbon go flying, and nothing shocks, crushes, or maims him. He counts it as a win.

His eyes memorize each thing he sees, a mid-size weatherproof metal lock box, a smaller, rectangular box, scrolls, shirts, pants, an insane amount of sweets, a weapons kit, some strings like-Oh heavens, those were undergarments! How in the world-?

"Pills, water. Oh my God, please."

Right, right. He was looking for medication. What if they're poison? Is this a suicide attempt?

He picks up the rectangular box and flips it open. Inside are spheres that shine, looking so much like pearls he thinks that's what they are for a moment. Then, the smell of bitter herbs and medication smacks him in the face. So, not pearls then.

Settled beside them is some over the counter cold and pain medication. He doesn't know which one she's asking for.

"Both," she heaves out. Both it is.

He picks up the canteen on the floor and she twists to accept the medication he practically tosses in her mouth, drinking deeply from the canteen. The last bit she swishes around her mouth before spitting it out into the can. How lady like.

She pants like she's just run a marathon, eyes glassy and looking at nothing in particular.

"Where am I?" she asks him, and her husky voice sounds especially rough. He elects to not answer that, instead asking his own question. Now is a good time for interrogation, when the subject is off balance and possibly not lucid. There is truth in wine, he hopes the same holds true for feverish and disoriented.

"How long have you been the Rakki Ryuu?"

"Since whenever people started calling me that," she answers, settling down into the cot.

"What is your goal?"

"That's a big question. To not let people down and help people. To be happy. To find my family again." Something inside her eyes shutters and she whines. He sees an expression of pure hurt cross her face.

"Kisame, Kisame is family. I have to, I have to-" she babbles out. He continues on, trying to ignore the hysteria rising up in her.

"Why did you help me? At the bar, and in the ambush?" he blurts out, curiosity overrunning him.

He can see the moment she finally realizes that she is tied up, her mind grasping on to something other than her teammate. He doesn't know if she's always this unstable, or if it is something brought on by illness and pain. He guesses that he'll figure it out.

"Wha-?" she asks quietly. He doesn't answer, but she seems to know anyway.

"Why did you assist a known enemy shinobi? What do you gain?" he says again, his tone unrelenting. She practically folds into herself, and he wonders where she is now, because it looks like she's far away from the situation. Her expression is twisted and distant, as if she's talking about someone who doesn't really exist.

"Kakashi was my sister's favorite," she says quietly, and the answer startles him. "He's cool, and he's smart, but he's sad. He's broken, but I like him anyway, because I know broken. Broken can get better."

He honestly doesn't know what to say.

"I heard about him, during the war. The said stuff about him, but they didn't know anything. He's a good guy. He helps people. He's crazy and he burnt my hands. He got drunk and threw up a lot. He got ambushed, but I helped. Is he okay?" she asks, turning to face him.

His mouth is dry. Behind his mask, he licks his lips. "Why did you help him?" he asks.

She tilts her head, and he can see her lashes flutter closed. She sounds further away, tired and worn out. "Everybody matters," she

whispers, "He doesn't deserve to die. He's broken. I want to see him one day when he's put back together, because I..."

She breathes out, and he has to lean in closer to hear the rest.

"I want to hear the bastard laugh," she says airily, succumbing to unconsciousness once more.

Kakashi thinks this is the weirdest conversation he's ever had. He has no idea what to do about it either. He has never been so confused in his life.

Strangely, he is reminded of Obito.

Somewhere, far away, there is a hiss. A man with golden eyes feels a security seal heat up in his pocket and he frowns, his pale face standing out against the darkness. A white haired youth standing behind him frowns as well.

The bratling is gotten herself into a situation, and the seals he placed on her bag are telling him many things.

Stupid girl, he thinks without heat. No matter, retrieving her is just another action that will bind her closer to him.

AN: SO, I think that it's really important to note that Ryuishi was very, very close to dying in this chapter. Like, so fucking close. One does not just take on ten hunter nin and bust nuts without consequence. I also think it's important to note that People are beginning to notice the Raki Ryuu and that she did some things that will be spoken of in later chapters. Remember all that Land of Rivers world building? We are seeing some of the results here. Others will follow after. Also, I also want to say it is not my attempt to do romance here. That's not what this is.

I want to thank my favoriter,followers,lurkers and reviewers. Bless your hearts and your computers.

A special thanks to my beta enbi, she had to deal with tons of tense issues in this chapter but she powered through.

Question: What character that Ryuishi hasn't encountered yet should she meet, and what would they do together?

Meeting Interrogation

I do not own Naruto.

Flashes of nightmares fly through her mind. The ground underneath her feet is shifting and unsteady like jello, and the air around her stinks of death. Above her the sky is empty, nothing inside of it. It is a hungry vacuum calling her home, calling her back. She takes a step forward, and her foot lands inside another corpse.

The landscape is filled with the remains of the fallen. Faces both familiar and not stare up at her, mangled and shredded. The Hozuki boy from her class looks up with glassy eyes, the lower half of his face missing. Suikami, her squadron's commander, looks up into the eternal abyss, his head separated from his body. A stranger floats in the quagmire, his amber eyes missing from his skull. Her pseudo-mother is in here somewhere, her face caved in like rotten fruit. Her cadaver strewn in and mixed with those she has lost (Her classmates, her squad, her family) and those she tore from the world with her own hands (enemies, strangers, on a battlefield, desecrated and gone un-mourned.)

Ryuishi shivers, and takes another step.

'I am lost,' she says, but the Void eats the sound before it can leave her lips. She walks with death in her soul, and blood leaks from her mouths and eyes. She can smell it over the shit and rot, the decay and bile. Its irony tang is metallic and savory like meat.

'I am lost, help me,' she tries to say, but her lips burble crimson and fear eats her. Her family watches from a distant bluff, separated from her, and though she cannot hear their words, she knows they are trying to call her back.

' I love you, I am lost. Help me,' she says, and it is to everyone this time, the dead and living alike. It is to her father and mother, sister and brothers standing on a distant shore. It is to the Hozuki boy crushed under her heel, to her jounin commander without a head and the stranger with no eyes.

' I'm lost,' she gargles out.

The dead watch on, silent and empty.

Watanabe Ryuishi wakes up, and thinks, *I should be dead*. It's not the first time she's had that thought, nor will it be the last. Technically, she died sixteen-some years ago, and should have been dead this whole time. This time though, it is day something something of her captivity, and she keeps wondering when the bastard is going to do her in. It's not the first time she has woken, she thinks, nor the first time she has been at least semi-lucid. She can recall a bathroom, a shower, and a myriad of dogs. All of whom were watching her. Always watching, one right after the other.

A coughing fit works its way up from her lungs, and she tugs against her restraints, attempting to cover her mouth and prevent spittle from flying everywhere. It's an exercise in futility, she knows, but still she tries. It's not as bad as some of the fits she remembers, and her body isn't sickly hot and slicked with sweat anymore. She thinks she's getting better. Her eyes lazily roll to the side of the cot where, of course, a dog is watching her. This one is big and ugly, like somebody tried mixing a mastiff with a bully breed. Its dark eyes stare at her from under a wide, thick brow.

"Hey," she says, and she notes her voice is not as croaky, "Please tell the dungeon master I never signed up for bondage play."

The dog stares harder for a second, then lets out an ear shatteringly loud bark. She cringes away from it.

"Friend, I ask you, please do not do that again."

It still does it, and this time, a bit of slobber ends up on her forehead. She sighs and turns her head to look up at the ceiling, ignoring the canine. Seriously though, she should be dead. She expected to be. One does not just take on a squad of hunter-nin, it's sort of like walking into Mordor. Shit just isn't done.

To be honest, she isn't sure how she feels about her borderline suicidal attempt at martyrdom, let alone her survival. She wasn't really thinking at the time, and now all she has time to do is think and think and think.

So she does.

Ryuishi thinks about all her plans and how they never seem to work out quite exactly the way she wants them too. She considers rash decisions made in the heat of the moment. She ponders about how much prison rations fucking suck. She wonders what the fuck the cot is made out of, and her restraints for that matter, because she can usually escape, but this shit is tough as hell. She evaluates the fact that she has been taken prisoner by the dude whose ass she just snatched out of the fire, and how she should have seen it coming. The bastard is a stickler for the rules.

Mostly though, Ryuishi tries not to remember. She tries to bury the image of a blue-skinned boy grinning at her with teeth like knives. She attempts to purge the memory of piggy back rides and a big, safe bed from her brain. She struggles not to cry when she remembers the feel of his hand in hers and the feel of his warm, smooth skin. She pushes to erase the faint smell of deep, brackish water and on-shore breezes from her mind. Ryuishi tries to take all the love she has for Kisame Hoshigaki and smother it out of herself and lock it away in a box.

... She fails at all of it. She loves him so much. Even if he is an enormous douchebag for ditching her, the cunt sucking ballsack. Jeez, what a fucking bummer.

Ryuishi sighs out, blowing some hair out of her face. To her side the dog lets out a soft wuff, and the almost silent sound of a door opening can be heard. Great, more of the same. She turns her head to look at the canine-masked ANBU looming inside her chamber, standing tall and intimidating against the monochrome walls. She wonders why he keeps the act up, because it's not like she doesn't know who he is.

"Ah, if it isn't the dungeon master! Whatever shall we speak of today? My nefarious plots for world domination? My secret plans for the universe's greatest brothel? How I'm actually a dragon wearing the skin of an adolescent girl?" she asks, saccharine sarcasm dripping from her lips. Honestly, this interrogation crap is boring. She's pretty sure he's taking it easy on her right now, what with all the life saving and debilitating injuries and illness and whatnot. Give him time though, and she is almost certain he'll break out the corkscrews. Not that they would be anymore effective. Pain doesn't help people get the truth, it gets them shit they want to hear. Torture is really unreliable like that.

"What is your relationship with your village?" intones the very boring man.

Lies, or truth? She likes to mix it up, so-

"I don't have a village," she answers sweetly. The answer brings no response from the figure.

"What is your relationship with your previous village?" he tries again.

"I never had a village."

"What is your relationship with the population that inhabits the geographic location where you lived from infancy to pre-adolescence?"

"Oh, you mean what is my relationship with Kirigakure?" she asks. Still no response. "Okay, well, I'll answer that if you answer this:

When am I free to go?"

The silence reigns between them. Even the dog is unnaturally still. For a moment she wonders again where the hell his team is. It isn't like Konoha to send an operative out alone, even on most reconnaissance missions. She wonders if he was doing a super stealthy mission, or one that was labeled so nonthreatening that it would seem okay to go solo. Then she thinks again and wonders who the hell is setting Hatake up for death. Probably some sneaky plot by somebody else. Which is shit. She'll have to confer with some of Orochimaru's shinobi contacts inside Fire Country to try and sniff out who it is. Anyone who has targets on people this high is a threat, and she can't have non-allied threats running loose. It's just bad business.

"What is your relationship with-" he starts.

"Oh my God, fine. Days of this is a little ridiculous, yeah? I have nothing to do with Mist, I never wanted to do anything with Mist. Mist can quite literally suck my dick."

Unbeknownst to her, Kakashi swallows an instinctive reply about her gender. "Extrapolate," he says instead.

Ryuishi sighs again, making sure her exasperation is heard loud and clear. She's mildly glad that her breath doesn't rattle in her chest this time. It makes the exchange more effective and less pitiful.

"I didn't exactly plan on being a kunoichi." a lie, "I'm not sure about Konoha, but in Kiri, it isn't like you're given a choice. That being said, a prostitute's child doesn't have the connections to squirm out of the choosing when it happens. I'm not sure anybody does, or even wants to. A surprising amount of people would love to become a trained assassin soldier rather than staying a starving, abused peasant," she answers. "So, I get noticed, I get forcibly recruited. Now, here I am."

"What caused the communications blackout six years ago?" he asks without pause.

"Oh, man. Uhm, Pretty sure that was a civilian revolution. You know, brought on by the subjugation and abuse that spanned generations. I guess you can only beat, rape, murder, and starve a people for only so long before they get real sick of your shit and burn the place to the ground."

He stares at her like she's lying. Which is weird, because she's totally not.

"What involvement did you have in this 'civilian revolution'?"

"Dude, I thought we were past this. You've seen it, I admitted it. You know who I am, cut the shit," she answers cheerfully.

"What involvement does the Rakki Ryuu have with the previously stated incident?" he says slowly, never taking his eyes off her face.

"I'm glad you asked. Well, along with the aforementioned beating, raping, murdering and starving, Kiri had a big ass list of what I like to call Human Rights Violations and General Dickery. You know, collateral damage against the non combatants, systemic government corruption, the treatment of women like breed stock, the ridiculously huge class divide, the extermination of entire families based on genetics, child sex trade, poor distribution of wealth, and a really fuckin bad attitude," she tells him. "SO, I said fuck that, and then let the people do what they wanted to do, which was burn that shit to the ground. The Rakki Ryuu didn't do much in that incident."

"Really," he asks, and it's more of a condescending statement, "You did nothing at all. The civilians suddenly just decided to turn against their leader with no leadership or encouragement, scrounged weapons from nowhere, and burned an established government to the ground. Just like that."

She smiles. "Just like that. Did you know somebody's trying to kill you?"

This time she does get a response. It's a slight tensing beneath his black cloak and a quiet inhalation of air. Not something she would have noticed if she wasn't expressly looking for just that. Not much at all, but there it is.

"All alone, and hunter-nin know exactly where you are? Konoha's staple is teamwork, even among your black ops. I wonder who is trying to fuck you over and why," she thinks out loud.

He doesn't answer.

"Not that it really matters to me, oh well. That being said, I would probably keep the information you just gathered to yourself. This is a private conversation between friends Hatake-san, and if there's a leak in your system, I would hate to see what would happen," she says. Now the man minutely bristles, and there is a marked change in the air, a shifting from calm interrogation to perceived threat. She keeps talking.

"I mean, I do understand you probably have to tell your Hokage, but I would end it there. If I have to pay for the mistakes of another, I will be pissed. Almost as pissed as others will be when I miss my check in dates."

The unsettled aura grows larger. Hatake takes a step closer and she realizes she is playing a dangerous game, but that's what friends do, right? And they are totally friends now. She has seen him vomit, and he has seen her cry. They both have tried to harm one another. All the ingredients are there, and it's a recipe for one beautiful platonic relationship.

"Explain," he orders, and just to show she can, she complies with it.

"I'm the Rakki Ryuu, right? I have been since I was eleven Hatake-san. How the hell do you think an eleven year old whose persona is

tied to the victory of the people survives by herself? When she has a price on her head and is wanted for unsaid crimes against state?"

He doesn't answer. She didn't expect him to.

"The answer is she doesn't do it by herself, you shit. I might have no superiors but I do have people who help me keep things calm and level. What the fuck do you imagine will happen when people discover the Rakki Ryuu is missing, or worse, dead? Do you think shinobi can hunt down every one of the Mumei when they can barely track the largest group? Do you think you can kill every whore and lowlife scum? Every farmer and trader and producer under my influence? Can you even tell the difference between those who like me and those who don't? I'm being serious now; I have no idea what they will do Hatake. I need to check in, soon."

"You're lying," he tells her, and yes, to some extent she might be. The scary thing is, to an even larger extent, she is probably not. She does have appointed check in dates, though her next one is like, a month away. Still though, she know Orochimaru keeps tabs on her, granted by gratuitous use of the seals he placed on her pack. If he overreacts, the situation could end in disaster. Not to mention what people would do if they found out she was dead or missing. She would become a martyr, a symbol. Why wasn't she thinking of this earlier? What if she had really died with those hunter-nin? In her old world there was a religious figure who spoke and acted for peace, and when he died, his people flipped right the fuck out.

Aaaand she just compared herself to a real religious figure. She is going straight to hell. Hot damn, she's starting to stress herself out.

"Not really," she answers, and her husky voice is smooth and steady.

"I still have trouble believing you are a favoured symbol of the people," he admits suddenly, and Ryuishi laughs. Like, she really, really laughs. It's so out of place, so sudden, so socially awkward she can't help herself. He looks like he can't tell whether to relax further or tense up again.

"I can't believe it either. If I thought a henge or disguise would fool people I would tell somebody else to do it," which is also a lie, because she wouldn't really trust anybody else, "But nobody I have ever met can mimic my chakra."

Here he pauses, and it is different from the silences before. He's still looming, and she's still chained, but the power distribution is still off. It doesn't feel like one is above the other, and that gives nobody the upper hand. It's almost... comfortable, even if she is tied to a fucking cot.

"Is it a Kekkei Genkai?" he asks.

She shakes her head, and she can feel the ends of her hair sweep against the floor. It's sorta gross. "No," she tells him.

"What is it?"

"I don't know." Another half truth. She really doesn't know what the Void is, if it's anything at all. All she knows is that death is in her veins, just as well as life. She shivers, and she tries not to think about her dream.

"How did you get it?"

"I was born with it," she says, checking out the concrete walls for like, the billionth time.

"What does it do?"

It's her turn to pause. If she comes out and says she has a death sense on top of everything else, well, it's kind of crazy. She feels more and more like she has too many skills every day. At what time is her awesome ability to wrangle fish going to save her ass? What the singular fuck is her mad fashion sense going to help? Why can she do that thing with her tongue? Well, she knows why, and a few others know why as well, but heh, it's not going to save her life one day. In fact, it may be the cause of more than one little death.

"ANYWAY," she declares loudly, clearing her throat and her head, "When the hell are you going to let me out of these cuffs, Hatake-san? I mean, I can get down with it eventually, but seriously, this is a little bit fast."

She can feel him glaring from behind his mask as she shuffles around. If she is really honest, she could dislocate her thumbs to slip out of the top ones, but with her broken fingers combined with those dislocated thumbs, getting out of the ankle shackles would be agony. Not to mention attempting to take out whatever dog was watching before it could take her out or alert Hatake. If her fingers where healed she could cast a genjutsu on the guard pup and she could run, but again, broken fingers. She knows her bag is under lock, along with her weapon, in another room. So, she would have to play the waiting game.

If Kakashi is honest, he is in a no-win situation. This line of questioning is going nowhere. He has no way to validate the answers she gives, nor can she prove them correct without being released. She's still right in some ways, though. If he thinks about it objectively, he cannot do much. The Rakki Ryuu, and by default, Watanabe Ryuishi, is a highly influential public figure. Physical coercion is almost out of the question, and he may be pushing it by having her restrained for so long. If word every gets out that the Lucky Dragon was mishandled by a Konoha-nin, he cannot imagine the result would be good.

He has no idea if her claims are correct, and he has all the confidence in the long standing shinobi system, but he does fear repercussion. Konoha is known for its medicinal prowess and it's top of the line technological development and manufacturing. It is only second to Kumo in terms of military power. The problem with this though, is that Fire Country is not rich in raw natural resources. Mineral ore, oil, feed-stock, grain, textiles, and bio-materials are imported from surrounding countries. They are building blocks which Fire Country turns into beautiful manufactured and produced goods.

Without them, markets would collapse and the country would feel it, as Suna was experiencing right now.

Konoha specialized in exports like timber and goods made with the bushy and leafy growths native to the area, which the soils supported. Clearing away this forest and turning it into farmland in attempts to become self-sufficient had left the country with the realization that the topsoil was too thin near the top, and the layers underneath too craggy and nutrient poor to grow crops year round.

If the Rakki Ryuu actually had some sway in trade, she could effectively cut off some of the goods that Konoha needed to stay above the rest. Not to mention the sway she held with the people. He had been in River Country, he had seen the shrines, heard the devotion inside the rumors. The whores, thieves, and bandits loved her, saw her as some sort of grand teacher. There were whispers from Grass of schools built and farmers' loyalty. He had some idea that cutting down their idol would only make her influence stick that much more, moving her from urban legend into religious figure. The price of civilian fervor and shinobi's attempts to crush it was written out fairly clearly in the ashes of Kirigakure. It would end well for nobody. If she is telling the truth, if the rumors are true...

Then Kakashi had bound one of the most politically and socially powerful figures of his time to a broken cot in an outpost in the middle of nowhere.

He feels uncertain.

"How old are you?" he asks, because the bingo book is far away and he is unsure.

"Sixteen," she answers.

The answer blows his mind. *Sixteen* . Two years younger than him, and she has become so important, has done so much.

"Why are you doing this?" he tries.

She rolls her eyes, which look less intense without her usual makeup. In fact, she as a whole looks less intense. There are bags under her eyes, and her butterscotch skin isn't quite as lustrous as usual. Her round features are less defined, her hair askew and a mess from having gone unbrushed so long. He cuts his observations off as she begins to answer.

"That is hella vague. Why did I do what? Get tied up? Stare at the ceiling? Answer dumb questions? Or are we getting philosophical, because if we are I should warn you that's my weak area. Half the time even I have no idea why I do what I do, let alone why people do anything at all. It's a huge bummer to think that kind of shit."

"Why did you help me?" he blurts, and then he winces inside his mask. How unprofessional. He had already asked that, already received his answer. Why was he asking again?

"Oh, that's easy. You're all messed up, and I know how that feels. Someone helped me, so I help someone else. I wanna see you laugh. That's the way the game should be played, forward, not back," she answers, and he doesn't like it, he's in way over his head. He needs reinforcements. He should have called for them a while ago, but something held him back. He still feels it telling him not to.

"Now it's my turn," she decides out loud, and he feels something stir in his gut. Was he ever in control of this conversation?

"What," she starts, and he leans forward in anticipation, "is your favorite food?"

He nearly falls back. He doesn't though, because he is trained better than that, but it is still a close thing.

"Why do you need to know that?" he sputters.

"Well, since we're friends and all, I thought next time I visited I would either make it or bring it over," she says nonchalantly, examining the bandaged fingers on the hand cuffed by her head.

"Friends?" he asks bewildered, and then stops short. " *Visit* ?"

She hums noncommittally and shifts against the back of the cot, tilting her head at an angle until he can hear the soft popping of the bones in her neck, going off like tiny, disgusting fire crackers. He's no doctor, but he knows nobody should be able to tilt their head to quite that angle unless they've spent years trying to achieve just that.

"Yah, friends. I mean, I haven't had any in a while, but I'm fairly certain that's what we're going to be. Also, yes, visit, because that's what friends do. They visit each other."

"You're a wanted criminal and a traitor," he reminds her none too softly, "and we are not friends."

"That hurts me, Hatake-san. I guess I'll have to just bring over whatever."

"The only way you're coming back to Konoha is in chains," he says, and the smile she gives him is not a comforting one. Even broken and beaten on a bed she still feels dangerous to him, and he cannot help the small twinge of anxiety he feels.

She refuses to answer anything else after that, and he changes out the dogs and leaves the room. It's time he reported in and called for backup. If there is any hope of bringing her in, it will not be by himself. He leaves only for a moment, mostly to grab one of the trained hawks flitting through the tall trees, but when he comes back, she is gone. The cell is broken, and Bisuke is limp on the ground. For a heart-stopping moment he thinks his companion is dead, but he isn't, he's just sleeping. The cuffs are wide open and her pack is missing. All that lingers are the soft scents of seawater and flowers.

Kakashi goes back out to cancel the last order, knowing that they will meet again. He still doesn't know what to feel about it.

AN: So remember how our delightful girl makes friends? The answer is this: In a totally fucked up way. Like, the most unhealthy way not become friends with people who forcibly detain you and defs don't become pals with people who have attempted to maim or kill you. That being said, we see more unsteady emotions and some of the night terrors Ryuishi has been having, along with the damage she is willing to deal herself to get what she wants. It should also be noted that while she is posturing, she is also unsure what really would happen if she died. Ryuishi has become a huge influence in the world by now.

Also, if the breakout seems too clean, remember that Orochimaru is a hella OP sannin in canon and can pretty much do whatever. Like, I have no clue what he couldn't do. Maybe he can't, um, bake? Also, if you want Kisame's POV, it is now in Songs gone Unsung, my side stories to this fic.

A big shout out to my lurkers, followers, and favoriters. To my reviews, I'm sorry if I haven't written you back, know that I love you. I'm thinking a summer wedding.

A ginormous gift of love to my beta, Enbi. Just for existing, and also because they edit like a boss.

Question: Ryuishi displays her talented tongue by tying a cherry stem in a knot in her mouth. How do other react? OR if that's too perverted, Ryuishi displays her skills talented cook. How do others react?

Meeting a Scolding

I do not own Naruto.

The last thing she remembered was seeing the dog in front of her slump over from an unseen force, a warning bark dying on its lips. She also remembered panicking and thinking, *Oh shit, how the fuck am I supposed to fight?* before hearing the snap of metal in the distance and a displeased hiss in a familiar rasping tone.

All of that was eclipsed by the fear of hearing her heart thud in her ears and the heaviness weigh down her limbs, the intimate feeling of her breath slowing down and everything stuttering and sluggishly grinding onward. Her mind had switched from panic to horror, filled with images of morphine drips and hospital beds. Her last conscious thought had been slow in her head, piddling along morning traffic in LA.

Drugs. He knows I hate depressants .

Then she had conked out like some sort of overused cliché maiden that needed to be rescued. Or like an overly drunk boy at a frat party. Or an anemic standing up too fast. *You know what*, she thinks groggily, *turns out passing out isn't that uncommon.*

She wakes up slowly, but the first thing she is aware of is the comforting smell of incense and the very faint traces of formaldehyde. It washes over her waking mind like a balm, and she leans into it, hiding from the wind blowing across her face before blinking out again.

The next time she comes to, which could be days or seconds, she has no clue, she is aware of an arm wrapped around her thighs and a shoulder jutting into her gut rhythmically. The hand is mindful of her wounds, and she can feel the barest of stretches on the gash on her

back, but it is surprisingly comfortable. You know, if not for the bony fucking joint being rammed into her stomach.

She blinks to awareness slowly, and it takes more effort than it should, but she is able to do it. Long lashes brush against her cheeks and she shifts again, her chin gently bumping against an unforgivingly muscular back.

"My hero," she slurs tiredly. Somewhere above her she hears a derisive sigh, and she feels the hand on her leg loosen a bit. She has no idea where they're heading, but she feels like it's probably one of the bases he keeps hidden from her.

Her eyes open fully and she registers green blurs speeding by and sandaled feet slapping against the ground. There is cloth under her face of a dark color as well.

That, and a surprisingly nice rear end below her head, a few inches away from her face. Who knew that Orochimaru had such a nice butt? Well, she herself might have, in her later years at the base, made objective and not at all interested observations about such things. Which is a damn shame. She wonders if anybody has ever complimented him on his appearance before. Maybe it's the drugs talking, but she decides to be the first.

"You have an aesthetically pleasing ass," she garbles out. "From a purely scientific point of view."

This time the hand on her thigh tightens to to a claw and she lets out a pained whine in her throat. His fingers are like fucking diamonds, holy fuck. She really thought adding the science part would prevent the punishment, but she gambled and lost. Saint Christopher on a fucking blue bandwagon, that *hurts* .

"Remain silent, child," Orochimaru orders. "I have already had to waste enough energy diverting attention away from myself. It was not a simple thing to escape the eyes of the organization so that I could retrieve you."

She hides a sigh in the cloth protecting his vertebrae. Oh man... She can feel a scolding coming. Scoldings from him are terrifying and brutally efficient. She swallows, suddenly filled with anxiety. It might have been better to remain in captivity than face his wrath.

They do reach a base, which means that at least some of her guesses are still good. It's an underground den, something he seems fond of, and it's in the middle of fucking nowhere. She wonders if he just finds these things and then claims them by right of conquest, or if he just hires contractors to build them before immediately killing them.

The whole place is a beautiful mixture of inlaid stone and unforgiving grey walls, just the sort of place she left last time. A brief memory passes through her head, of her as a child streaking paint against the halls, leaving patterns of black tribal vines and vivid blue flowers that melted into overcast seas. Maybe they're still there, or perhaps he cleaned them off? She doesn't know.

He takes her to what could either be an infirmary or an experimentation cell. She's really hoping it's the former.

"Stay here and get ready for treatment," he tells her, throwing her bag onto a counter and sweeping out of the room. It's all very dramatic and she wilts when he leaves, beginning to change into a hospital gown. She is getting in *so much* trouble. A free hand full of broken fingers traces the scar across her throat.

She hopes it won't be that bad this time.

He comes back, and there is somebody trailing behind him. Surprisingly it is... or rather, *they* are small. Small, and very familiar. She tries not to say anything at all, but that is definitely a young Yakushi Kabuto haunting the footsteps of Orochimaru.

Ryuishi frowns and bites back a gripe. Is he trying to replace her?

She sweeps the thought away. She guesses that some things, like an incredibly genius iryo-nin and infiltration specialist yearning for a purpose in life, are just too good to pass up. There's no need to get catty or jealous about it. So what if he grows up to be the Sannin's right hand? She is a completely different body altogether.

Still, he looks like just a kid, with his fluffy white hair and big Harry Potter glasses. His eyes are so cutely focused, so intense. It's a good look for his adorable little face.

Oh. Oh no. Not again, she thinks, not another cute child. God save her.

"What were you thinking?" The rough hiss draws her away from her staring, and she looks up, trying to not be petulant about the whole thing. Orochimaru is glaring at her, his golden slitted eyes practically blazing with irritation, demanding an explanation.

"Ughhh..." she responds inelegantly.

He makes a sweeping motion with his hand, and the child comes closer, observing her hands and leg apathetically, showing no response to the beautifully colorful bruises that have exploded across her skin. She winces because she never thought about how she looked when she was in captivity, only observed undressed by dogs. Now, in a thin hospital gown, she must look like death warmed over.

"There were some hunter-nin, maybe like, ten or so? And there was an altercation, because I said hey, fuck off, and they didn't want to listen. So then-" she babbles nervously, but Orochimaru cuts her off with a graceful slash of his hand through the air.

"Stop. Ten? You are nowhere near that level. You should be dead. Were you trying to get yourself killed?" he asks testily. His words are bitten out with cold efficiency, and it seeps like ice into her bones. She doesn't answer, because she doesn't really lie to Orochimaru. He's the only person who knows her whole truth, and she doesn't

want to mess that up. She's not sure of the answer either. At first it had been a diversion, but then she had felt like, maybe, it wouldn't have been so bad.

It was dumb, she knows that. She doesn't want to die now, but there had been a moment of weakness. It had almost cost her everything, and the consequences that would have followed would have been dire. She knows death, knows the tumbling abyss, the forever falling in nothing. She knows the Void that stretches on and on and on. It lives inside her soul, that numbness. She was so stupid.

Orochimaru narrows his eyes at her silence and takes a step closer. "Stupid girl," he hisses, "Your time hasn't come yet. We have plans, things to do."

"Why didn't you tell me about him?" she asks quietly.

Orochimaru looks baffled for a moment, his stone cold features widening by a fraction. It's the most surprised she has ever seen him, and it isn't much. The man has an uncanny and unsettling ability to predict people, even her. Yet this time she surprised him. There is silence in the room, and save for the boy examining her wounds, nobody moves at all.

"He's there, isn't he? They said he left, and there are only a few places so hidden from my eyes. He's in the group, why didn't you tell me?" she asks again.

He steps back and looks at her through half lidded eyes, and she sees something inside them. He knows what it is like, he remembers the familiar sting of a teammate choosing such a different path. This is the part of him that lets her know there is yet humanity inside of him, and that fearful part of her shivers with empathy.

"This is not how I desired you to obtain this information," he tells her, and in a way, that is enough. This was probably the shittiest way she could have gotten the news, spat with hatred from an opponent's mouth. Knowing him, he wanted to use it to make her put more trust

into him, abuse it and deliver it with addictive poison and comfort. It's what she would have done.

"Is he... Is he alright? Healthy?" she whispers.

"It will do nothing for you to know this information. You have given the two of them too much power over you, if you are so willing to make such suicidal choices when they do not return to your side," he scolds.

She breaths in a shaky breath and feels something squeeze in her chest, the ache of loss. "There's one left, Orochimaru. These are my choices to make," she replies. Her mind whispers his name- *Zabuza*, it says, *sweet, monstrous Zabuza*. She loves him too.

"Stupid, self-destructive choices. You are neither of those things, so do not play at it."

Ryuishi looks up at him, her coal eyes determined and wild. "I'm not going to. I'm going to beat the shit out of him until he knows what a bastard he is. He's mine, Orochimaru. They both are. I don't let what's mine go so easy."

He scoffs at her, and she deflates a little. Yeah, she knows it's not a great plan, but still, it's what she has. It's not like the snake summoner's derision hurts her pride or anything. (It totally does.)

"Big words. I have seen him, child, and let me tell you, he would be able to take down ten hunter nin with ease," he says, and she hears the reprimand in his rasping tone.

She does not pout, not one bit. "Agh! well, I'll come up with something better then! Give it time, you know I can do it," she says. She feels the telltale slide of medical chakra against her wounded thigh. There is a loud gasp, and she feels it immediately retreat when it touches her own power.

"Oh shit, sorry, uhm-" she turns, staring at the kid. He's looking up at her like she's some sort of trick, his eyes narrow and calculating. It's pretty fucking adorable. Even knowing his history with Root doesn't stop her from her next action.

"-mmm My God you're super cute," she says, sliding out a hand to ruffle his hair, mindful of her broken fingers. She twists to look at Orochimaru, who looks at her in exasperation.

"Where did you get him? Did you make him? Can I have one?" she asks, knowing the answer to all of them.

Orochimaru gives her a cold look and with a movement too fast to follow, stabs his fingers through the hole in her foot. She screams, and her warbling screech causes the child under her hand to flinch.

The sound is quick, and dies out fast, but the agony remains even after he removes his digits. Ryuishi is left panting on the examination table, a cold sweat lining her skin as she breathes through gritted teeth.

"You are not to be rewarded for imbecilic behavior," he tells her. She laughs through the horrible pain, a disturbing sound, and locks eyes with him.

"You could have just said no," she hisses. She resists the urge to call him every name in the book, knowing it will earn her more of the same from the tricky bastard.

Orochimaru gives her a smirk before turning his eyes back to the boy, who is watching them both with a wary curiosity. "Kabuto, the sensation will do no lasting harm. Healing her is perfectly safe, if uncomfortable. I do not believe this will be the last time you will be tasked with fixing the Rakki Ryu, so learn to endure," the pale man says, and Ryuishi gives him a winning smile.

They both know while it wasn't a proper introduction, Orochimaru just gave her his name and the okay to talk with him. Which is great,

because while she knows he is going to be in Konoha eventually, she also knows that right now he's a kid. He belongs to another, but maybe she can help him not be such a butthole. Or braid his hair. Or something.

Ah, Orochimaru and his appreciation for the carrot and the stick. He's turned reward and punishment into an art.

"Ryuishi," he snaps, and she is still beaming at him, though the horrible agony singing in her veins makes her sweat, "I'm coming up with a new regiment for you. If you insist on taking on challenges far larger than your power level, you will have to grow in strength. I will not retrieve you again."

She smothers a groan. His words spark a question she was meant to be asking, though.

"Did you kill him? The ANBU guarding me, I mean," she asks.

Orochimaru sends her a withering look, and she crushes the urge to flinch away from him. She loves the man, but he can be frightening.

"Do not insult me. Not only would killing him have left a trail, but your guard is the last of a bloodline. Not one I am particularly interested in, but I am not wasteful," he tells her. Her smile remains in place, and he can probably read the things inside of it.

"Great, because I have plans for him. It would be a shame to waste the effort I've put into them," she tells him, and he nods in understanding, his eyes somber.

"Such lofty goals you have," he tells her, coming in closer. Her smile softens from its manic state and she catches his scent again, that comforting mix of incense, laboratory, and blood. Even though he can be vile, he still feels.... not safe, but... familiar. Homey, almost. A professional partner in crime and a guardian. She had forgotten how much he has done for her, how much they will help each other. The exchange of truths and lies, the gifts they give one another: three

clans for her sanity, information for training, reliance for companionship.

His hand raises, and she can feel it tracing the scar around her throat, his thumb stroking the smooth tissue. "Do not do something so foolish again, Ryuishi," he tells her, and she hums in the back of her throat.

"Yes, Orochimaru-sama," she says. He tsks and steps away, gliding to the exit.

"Repair her, and then both of you clean up and meet me," he says, his voice carrying behind him. Ugh, that beautiful drama queen. She really shouldn't like him as much as she does.

Ryuishi feels small hands on her thigh again as she watches him go, her eyes only leaving him the moment he is about to disappear from sight. Her mom used to say it was bad luck, watching someone go completely. She doesn't know why, but she still holds it to be true at times like this.

Once more she feels the flutter of chakra coaxing her own to life, pulling it together. It's always an odd sensation, like supergluing your fingers together. Only, like, more natural or some shit.

Her dark eyes slide to take in the young boy at her side. His own eyes are fixed and seemingly focused behind his glasses, but she is older than him by more years than her body should be. She knows he is thinking, she can read it in the posture of his shoulders and careful blankness of his face.

"Go ahead and speak, Kabuto-kun," she says, and his focus does not waver, but she can tell he heard her. He doesn't answer at all, and she smiles, even though she is tired and in pain. A game, then. She likes games.

"What is it you're thinking about? Who I am? No, Orochimaru already gave you that," she ponders out loud. He remains unfazed.

"Maybe it's where I got so hurt? Or perhaps it's why I am here?" not even a twitch, but she does see a shuttering of his eyelids.

"Oh, that then? Are you wondering why I get special treatment? Why he didn't leave me to die?" she asks, and this time he cannot stop from glancing up at her. So cute, in that nefarious little nerd sort of way. Agh, children-be still, her moe-obsessed heart.

Ryuishi smiles and ruffles his hair again, but he makes no move to dodge under it, even though she knows he could. "Don't worry about it, kiddo. If I'm guessing right, than Orochimaru offered you a deal, right? Something like a goal, or a purpose. An important one, if he's letting you know about me," she states to the room at large. He slows in his ministrations, listening closer, and she congratulates herself silently.

"Well you should probably know that whatever it is, I'm not a threat to it. Me and him, we have an understanding. I'm not about to get in his way, and if you're doing what he wants, then that means I don't meddle in your affairs as well. Unless, of course, you ask me to," she says.

Quiet reigns again for a moment, and she can feel the tightness of new skin over her leg. He moves downward, clearing away the bloody tattered bandages around her punctured foot. She wishes he would heal her fingers first, because hands are very important and all that shit, but she'll take what she can get at this point. Especially if he can get it to stop throbbing, because the fiery pain Orochimaru gifted to her has not even begun to fade.

"He favors you."

The words makes her think and once more she traces her throat, thinking hard about what the boy said. Yes, she supposes he does. Then again, Ryuishi has worked her fucking ass off to get him to acknowledge her, and still he finds her wanting at times. She has gifted him with willing subjects for experimentation, access to three separate Kekkei Genkai, profits from trade, and use of an enormous

information network. She has given him her trust, her secrets, her care, her affection and respect. She has paid for his favor with blood, sweat, and tears.

"I worked for it," she says simply.

Honestly, the fact that he saved her ass only goes to show that while he is most definitely tracking her, he also gives enough shits to not let her die. It shows he gives back as well. Quid pro quo.

"He gives you liberties I have not seen given to others."

She laughs. "Don't worry about it. Like I said, I worked for it."

For now, it ends the conversation, and Kabuto silently goes on to continue her treatment. They bask in it.

The Third Hokage, Sarutobi Hiruzen, reads over the report one last time. He skims over the details once more, both surprised and unsurprised. Something like weary dread settles in his stomach, a beaten acceptance that comes with time and understanding.

The rising rumors of the so-called Rakki Ryuu had just begun to infiltrate shinobi ranks in Fire Country, but by this information, it is not something that should surprise him. If the Rakki Ryuu was truly the end result of Water Country's poor leadership and brutal training, then it would take years to reach this far north. His only regret is that the trend was not noticed sooner, but he thinks that it was probably planned out that way, hidden from watching eyes and waiting ears until it was too late to reverse the influence.

Watanabe Ryuishi just may be one of the brightest to come out of that blood soaked land, a once in a generation genius. The thought is not at all comforting. He knows how insidious geniuses can be.

The words stand out at him, the absurd facts given life and truth by the words from the subject's own mouth. Eleven, he thinks, she was

just a small girl when she brought a Hidden Village to its knees. Barely entering puberty, and she had brought a city with a history and strength to rival Konoha low. It would have begun long before that, he muses as well. The preparations would have taken time, the amassing of equipment, the placement of personnel, the escape routes and organization of such a mass disappearance of such a large portion of the populace. He is impressed, despite himself.

He is also wary.

If she had stopped there, she might have been thwarted. A pesky bug that could have been controlled, but a useful tool. Yet, it seems she did not. No, like a spider spinning its web, she had continued to work in silence. Building a network that could threaten nations and mold the shape of the future, she had gone and used the one thing many people had overlooked. She had used the people, and they loved her for it. They loved her for seeing them, for cultivating them, for giving them dreams and hopes.

Now, eliminating such a threat would have consequences even he would have trouble imagining. Even if she was silenced, even if she was gone from the picture entirely, her touch would still linger. Ideas cannot be killed, even when their creator is dead. He cannot even begin to guess what the populace would do in his country, or in others. If it is anything as sudden as what they now know happened in Kiri, it would be a disaster. Fire Country would burn from the inside out. The Elemental nations would turn in on themselves, shinobi fighting against those they were supposed to protect. She would become what the Fourth had-a symbol, a martyr.

It was made even more complicated by the fact that from the information gathered, the general people did not seem to dislike her. In fact, many seemed to do the opposite. She hadn't ruled with fear, or unrelenting force, she ruled by the concession of her people. They chose to make her what she was, they willingly gave her position, and they seemed content under her attention. Even the Daimyo had seemed surprised with the change in their populations; the new thirst

for life had given them a firmer grasp on their importance in the cycle of things.

Truly, she was a creation of Water Country, taking whatever shape she needed to fill. Adaptable and fluid, she poured herself out to the world and trickled slowly into the culture. She was like the tide, slowly and rhythmically working against what many would see as an unmovable cliff side, wearing it down into nothing but sand.

Sarutobi puffed on his pipe, letting the acidic smoke fill his mouth before breathing it out slowly in a great cloud of grey.

She was not infallible, though. There were ways she could be beaten. The girl was young, and though she had been doing this for many years, she was not too experienced. Her greatest strength, the people, were also her greatest weakness. She was responsible for them, and there were things that they demanded from her. Attention, effort, and respect must all be given by a leader. She did, and it seemed she cared for them as they cared for her.

If he thought poisoning them against her would work, he would attempt to do so. He could see it being successful to some extent, but he could also foresee it opening a divide among the population, one that would wreak havoc on the sense of unity needed to progress as a country. If arguing among themselves would do anything but create violence and discord, he might take that option.

Instead, though...

He places the report down and looks up at the masked operative in front of him. A good shinobi, a loyal man: Hatake Kakashi is one of the best ever to serve.

He was also the seeming focal point of these reports.

Twice the Rakki Ryuu had come into his city, twice she had left with nothing vile in her wake. Three times she had interacted with his forces, three times she seemingly sought out the man in front of him.

Once may have been a coincidence, twice was the beginning of a pattern. Three times was a confirmation.

There may have been other variables in play of course, but it seemed to him that the operative in front of him had attracted the attention of an upcoming power. Sarutobi imagined that a young sixteen-year-old girl who had spent such a large amount of time in war, who had seen the horrors of the Bloody Mist, who had survived in isolation for years running from authority, would have little stable companionship. He knew the signs. She was emulating them quite clearly.

For whatever reason, the Rakki Ryuu was reaching out to his operative, trying to form some sort of bond.

Why else would she take time to care for a stranger and an enemy, at great risk to herself? Why else would she divert attention from an ambush, nearly dying in the process, just to let that same stranger go unharmed? Why else would she speak so freely, act so casually, if not in an attempt to create an amicable relationship between two people?

It could be an infiltration attempt, of course, but it would be a poor one. He doesn't imagine that such a bright child could be so sloppy if that was her intent. No, when she had asked questions, they had been about the operative. She showed concern for his well being and his opinion. She was compromised, and Sarutobi could use that.

He could not strike out at her without repercussions, whether it be by trade or riots. If, of course, she held as much sway as was said, but he would not risk it. He could, however, help cultivate a growing affection and settle someone he trusted to whisper in her ear. Somebody who would report back to him, who could rival her and detain her if necessary. Somebody strong enough influence her and remain loyal to his home.

It would not be simple, or fast, but it could have more than a few benefits. An alliance between Konoha and a budding power would

be more than spectacular. Increased trade and revenue, a powerful asset who was both legendary and revered. The content of the people and increased flow of information and influence. It would be a great boon, for sure.

Of course, if this fails, and she remains a free radical, an unseen wild card, well, then there are other ways to gain information. His can request his old student to begin looking into this as well.

"Hound," the Hokage says, looking up, "I have a new mission for you. One of utmost importance."

The man in front of him stands ready to receive orders.

AN: Here we see the greatest misunderstanding in history. Sarutobi sees correlation and jumps to causation, and somehow, Naruto himself goes unseen. We also see whatever Ryuishi and Orochimaru have going on, and even better, there will be more of it in the next chapter! Yay!

Okay, so I said I've been dropping hints to plot in the previous chapters? Somebody asked me to state them, and while I don't think I can work it into the story so well, the plot is focused on bonds. Bonds and mental and personal growth. That and shit tons of world building and manipulation that will play in later. It might get a bit Konoha centric in the near future, be warned.

I'd like to thank my readers. My followers, favoriters, and reviewers are the people who have gotten me so far. I lost my muse, and am still struggling now and then, but you guys are the ones who keep me going, I hate to let you down.

To my reviewers! Some crazy shit has been happening lately, and I want you to know that I have been being a douche about replying! I'm sorry, I LOVE YOU.

Let us all give thanks to the wondrous and beautiful enbi, my beta, who called me cool. For that alone I like her, but I also really appreciate the grammar she fixes.

Question: Ryuishi has the habit of crawling into peoples beds and using them for warmth and snuggles. This is seen with the Kaijuu no Kiri. Whose bed does she sneak into and how do they react to the forced affection?

Meeting a Therapist's Orders

I do not own Naruto. Or Marvel.

When her healing session is finished-seriously, that shit is still like magic to her-Ryuishi ventures to meet with Orochimaru once more. The young Kabuto trails a pointed two steps ahead of her, sending a silent message that she is entirely capable of reading. It makes her want to laugh, his little passive-aggressive display. Like she thought before, Kabuto may grow up to be Orochimaru's right hand man, but she is an entirely different body altogether.

The fresh skin along her injuries stretches uncomfortably tight on her thigh and foot, like a new scar would. It looks like all the surrounding flesh, but she knows that for a while yet the epidermis and muscle tissue will be weaker as it melds with the rest. Her fingers are a bit stiff, but workable. The bruises covering her body remain only in small spatters, where the darkest and worst colorations had been. All in all, she's almost back up to shape physically speaking. Kabuto really is great with medical ninjutsu, even at his age. The only thing that remains to be done is consume her whole body weight in food and listen to whatever Orochimaru is going to hammer into head this time.

Ryuishi does both at once.

The great thing about living inside a giant fortress built to withstand siege is that the food supply is awesome, so with a quick detour to the kitchens-and by quick detour she means half an hour of searching-her arms are full of several meals' worth of delectables as the stone-faced little boy leads her to his master. Together they enter a grand chamber, or rather, a gymnasium-sized hall with awesome stonework and even better columns. Say what you want about the sociopath, but he does have great taste in architecture.

Ryuishi knows the subtle art of body language, knows that if she sits she is placing herself on a lower rung than the one on which the two males stand. Knows that by walking behind Kabuto she was supposedly acknowledging his place as better than her. She understands the loaded glances and the delicate balance of power between her and Orochimaru, and now, this newcomer.

That being said, she doesn't give a flying fuck right now. Ryuishi is hungry, she's sore, and she just escaped an undetermined amount of time in captivity. She was chained to a fucking cot, for God's sake. Her head is kind of a mess, and even though her episode is slowly passing, she has had who knows how many attacks within the last week alone. She almost fucking died by way of hunter-nin, and she just got the holes in her body closed after having them there for like, ever. She is so done with playing games, at least for as long as it takes her to eat everything in her arms.

She plops down on the ground, legs splayed to stretch out, and drops her pile of edibles on to the ground. No more rations for her, no sir.

Kabuto looks utterly disgusted by her lack of respect, or backbone. Orochimaru, however, looks like he isn't surprised in the least. She supposes that they did live together for many years, and that her current behavior is set within whatever parameters he has for her. Even exasperated, the man looks fucking scary as all hell, his golden eyes boring into her own as she watches him observe her.

"Kabuto, leave us and prepare the lab for samples," the pale man orders. Kabuto looks momentarily like he is displeased before he wipes all expression from his face and bows. Ryuishi very purposely does not smirk. She shoves an entire fistful of salmon into her face, takes an enormous gulp of tea, and chews while she waits for his instructions.

"Due to recent events, I would like to reevaluate how effective the prescription is on your condition. Not only do your moods seem to be unstable, but so is your behavior. An adjustment in dosages may

need to occur," he tells her. Inside his head he calculates body weight and activity levels, wondering how much he would have to change. The original pill was prescribed for an eleven-year-old child, and over the years her chemistry will have shifted and altered with hormones. He included this when preparing her newer supplements, of course, but new data will allow him to cater it to her needs better. He cannot afford to have her acting so rashly.

Ryuishi grunts in acquiescence around her mouthful of food. She expected as much. She guesses that before she leaves she would have to give him more samples and take one of his written test evaluations.

"You will also find that any attempt to continue your plans for at least two months will have adverse effects for yourself," he rasps, and this time she is less pleased. She squawks in protest, half-chewed food being hastily swallowed, and he watches it all through narrowed eyes. She may be disgusting at times, but she is so very useful. There is no excuse for what she has done. He realizes once again how much would have collapsed without her, and wants to crush the stone beneath his feet. Careless girl, wasting all the work he poured into her.

"You can't do that!" she says, affronted. His answering glare is a vicious thing, and even with all her experience, she cannot quite resist the urge to fling herself back from it. Orochimaru is livid, and he's not hiding it at all. He can see it written on her features, the wariness of him. She is reckless, and he will stomp it out of her. He does not grant his favor easily, but she has it. He will see to it that she does not waste her potential.

"I cannot stop you, but I can alert Kagami to your behavior, who would alert others," he hisses, and the threat is very real. While he could not actually prevent anything, doing such a thing would severely damage her image, and having Kagami constantly sending watchers under the guise of concern would be exhausting. She forgot the power she gave him could also lash back at her. Ryuishi glares back at him, indignant and afraid all at once.

"If you had tried such a thing under a regime with any sort of standards, you would have been blacklisted from duty for much longer, not to mention put under watch. Your inability to move on from past relationships and absolute refusal to find acceptable coping mechanisms is abhorrent. What you do is not stress-free, and your lack of acknowledgement of that fact allows these stressors to break down your stability," he spits at her, and this time she flinches back as if struck.

"Who are you to-!" she protests, and he cuts her off with a hiss that is so absolutely threatening, her skin breaks out in goosebumps. She clenches her jaw and withholds a shiver, watching him with wide eyes.

" *I am the one you allowed to do this. When you first came to me, broken and insane, I fixed you . In return, you gave me the ability to deter you from returning to that state. You are the one that set up these checks and balances of power. You are the one that allowed this, and seeing how you are succumbing to rash decisions and emotion, I am exercising the right to utilize this power,*" he tells her.

Ryuishi knew the scolding was coming, but she was deluded when she thought it was over. Not even making her scream out in pain could have stopped this. And the worst part is that he's right. She *has* been succumbing to it, allowing it to overcome her logical thought. She isn't where she needs to be mentally, and she knows that. She also knows that her choices upset her, and the fact that she is so fucking disturbed by a miscalculated variable makes her more angry at herself. She isn't stupid, and she shouldn't be making stupid, juvenile mistakes. It still hurts though, and the fact that it does makes her livid. She wants it to be as simple as he makes it sound, but it takes a lot of her willpower to get up every day. Now, knowing that one of the things she had gotten up for wasn't coming back for her...

It stung. It hurt. She hated it for that.

"What about the progress in Grass and Rice?" she asks, trying to switch topics.

Orochimaru settles a bit and looks down at her, his gaze less intense and livid. He sees her acknowledging her shortcomings, and it pleases him.

"The progress made in both areas is remarkably fast. Fast enough that when combined with the success in River, others are beginning to notice. You haven't been sloppy, but I think we both know that we cannot afford to have the eyes of the others on us so soon. After two months of leave, I suggest you slow your visits and continue to focus on cementing the loyalty you already have," he tells her.

She sighs before filling her mouth with food again, thinking it over and trying not to be pleased with his praise. He is right, as usual. If people are beginning to take notice, it is time to slow things down. She could threaten them all she wanted, but she didn't have direct control over her people. Everything they did, they chose to do. It was part of her strength, because she could never force them into things. Everything they *did* do for her not only meant that much more, but it meant that they knew they had freedom as well. It was part of the allure of her discipline.

It was also a weakness, because loyalty like that was fluid and not totally dependable. She wouldn't trade it though, because it was another one of those checks, the things that kept her from being just like a Kage. People had the right to question her, to say no to her. She would not take that away from them. That being said, cementing loyalties meant that they would be more willing to say yes, which was very useful.

"... Alright." she mumbles around her food. "But, I'm not staying here for two months." Orochimaru looks less pleased at her announcement. She swallows the savory meat, fiddling with her hands. Her heart beats quicker in her chest, and she is afraid, so very afraid of him.

"I will stay long enough for the samples to be taken along with the evaluation. I will also consider whatever intense and most likely insane training schedule you come up with, because you were right to say I need to get stronger. I will not stay here, though. You already have an enormous amount of influence on my life, the largest of pretty much anyone. I am not so naïve to give you everything, though. I want to remain a partner, and not become your tool," she tells him bluntly, pushing past her fear.

"You are foolish to think that I would mismanage such a gift," he tells her, and yes, that is totally a sales pitch. She has no doubt Orochimaru would manage her great, but that's the thing-she doesn't want to be under management. The expression on her face must state as much, because though he does not smile, he certainly does smirk. He likes it when she reads the actual meaning of his words, she knows that.

She is struck again by how charming this man is, how much she wouldn't mind being his tool. His charisma and cleverness inspire loyalty, and he is so very good at what he does. Even armed with foreknowledge and histories beyond his comprehension, she is just keeping up with him when it comes to schemes. Truly, he is frightening and awe-inspiring.

Ryuishi swallows nervously.

"I will remain away from duty for two months. That's it. Two. No negotiation. I will also attempt to find better outlets, but I retain the right to keep those outlets away from you. I'm sure you're livid with me, and you have that right. I fucked up, and I fucked up bad. That being said, I am displeased that you kept my teammate's defection from me for months. I have that right. All in all, I find myself unsurprised. We both know in the span of our relationship, secrets must be sometimes kept." She looks at him then, drinking from her tea insolently, her eyes just as piercing as his own. She tries to bury her hurts, and she somewhat succeeds.

They remain there in the silence of the grand room, eyes locked. Even though she knows their relationship, she also knows that they each are trying to constantly gain power over the other as well, but where Orochimaru believes this will place him firmly as the leader, she already knows that that is not what will happen here. She gives him power over her, and she can just as easily rip it away. Granted, it wouldn't be clean, or even easy. The fallout would be enormous, but in the end, it wasn't impossible.

She still hesitates to call their relationship a friendship. The idea of that is weird and uncomfortable to contemplate. When it comes down to it, their very complex relationship can be boiled down very easily: they give each other what they need. Not what they want, but what they need, whether the other person likes it or not.

"Besides, I don't know how much longer you can milk whatever explanation you gave the organization. The quicker you can get rid of me and plant the child where you want him, the better chance we have at remaining a well-kept secret," she tells him.

His focus on her sharpens and she smiles, the same little grin she knows makes her eyes slit and her plump lips stretch high and thin. The one that says, *I know things*. She copied it from Orochimaru himself, and the Cheshire Cat. Thanks, Disney.

"Oh, don't look at me like that. I know a general being groomed when I see one. Kabuto-kun is a quite the catch, so young and capable. Already trained to obey his master, to be the root that supports the tree."

Orochimaru doesn't give anything away, but she knows he had assumed she was ignorant of that group. Which she would be-if, you know, she hadn't read it in a comic book. Seriously, even knowing that Root existed, it was hard to come up with substantial evidence of such a claim. They were more hidden than the fucking Winter Soldier.

"I will inform you, though, that I claimed dibs on that ANBU first. I know more people than you are after the Sharingan, and I have no problems with that, save for the fact that that particular specimen has already been claimed. All interested parties should search elsewhere," she says, and she knows Orochimaru catches the meaning behind it.

The 'tell Danzo to fuck off' is pretty clear, even if she doesn't name drop. So far, the old bat is her number one suspect for whoever was trying to eliminate Hatake. Not many else would have the resources to set him up like that, or the contacts to submit a mission report and inform Kiri. Granted, it could be Orochimaru himself doing it, but there isn't much reason. He wants a whole Uchiha body, not just an eyeball. Other leads would be investigated, of course, she wasn't sloppy.

"Two months," he reminds her, switching subjects in a way that lets her know he is in agreement with her.

"Two months. No work, no intelligence gathering, no networking," she reiterates.

He nods, and that is that.

So, that's the story of how she ended up here, half-sunk in a hot pool of water, naked underneath the stars.

Well, not really.

It took four days for Kabuto and Orochimaru to run her bloodwork and evaluate her mental status. It had taken many more underhanded discussions between her and the lord of snakes to get the details sorted out. Like, yes she would stay away from work, seriously, and no she would not allow a 'companion', he was already tracking her, he didn't need more than that. Yes she would check in, no not with his summons, again, he's already watching her like a fucking hawk, what more does he need?

It had turned out that trying to find outlets wasn't easy. She didn't have the skills to be an artist, and beside her portraits of her family or her inclination towards adding some color to Orochimaru's bland bases, she wasn't that keen on creating things. She couldn't play an instrument to save her fucking life, and she had no clue about writing. Keeping a diary was a security risk she didn't need, and she didn't have friends to just chill out with. She didn't have very many skills in a lot of areas that could have helped her here. She was supposed to be avoiding stressors and possible triggers, which meant that fighting was out. She was also supposed to find ways to use up her excess energy and relieve her unstable emotions.

She is struck with the thought that her life has become a meme. She has all these feels, these dangerous, destructive, heart-wrenching, mind-shattering feels, and she has no idea what to do with them. In her old world, she might have been indulgent in her behavior. Gone clubbing night after night. Drank herself sick and chain smoked until her lungs burned. Danced until her limbs went numb and slept with whoever she wanted, whenever she wanted. Maybe she would have secluded herself in her apartment and ignored her roommate/best friend until she had mastered a new and entirely useless talent.

That's the real kicker, though. Back then, she had people to do that with, a reliable network and social circle. Now she has an up-and-coming benevolent dictator who doubles as her therapist and maybe, sorta, kinda, perhaps, frien-nope, still can't say it. She has followers up her butt, and a spy network manager who runs a brothel in Kumo. She has two batshit, messed up, and neglected little boys who adore her, but whom she also has plans to use as plot triggers and pull out points.

Once again, her thoughts circle back to her boys. Zabuza and his inability to understand metaphors and human needs. Kisame and his stupid, not at all cute or friendly, conversation.

She shouts angrily into the water. It comes out as bubbles.

What the flying fuck was she supposed to do for two fucking months? What habit does she have that isn't self destructive?

She's fucking *tired* of mourning and brooding. She's sick to death of being upset and angry at herself and lamenting her lack of friends. She wants to be happy again, dammit! Her stupid brain just needed to get that memo and get on her fucking level!

She shrieks again into the water. She wishes she could fight. She wishes she could use that outlet, even if she knows it's not what she needs. She wants to smash somebody's face, watch it cave in like a pumpkin toss two weeks after Halloween. She wants to grab somebody by the ankles and watch their life leave them in a silver stream of bubbles.

She is so *fucked* .

In the empty hot springs, she flips the fuck out, striking the water with her fists, her palms, her elbows. She stands up at one point, just so she can slap the shit out of the steaming water from a better vantage. She has a right and proper fit, like she is a toddler again.

Dammit! She was an adult, why the hell couldn't shit be easy? Why the fuck was it so hard to make friends? Why was plotting political schemes so hard? What was it to her if everyone died? She was already dead, why the fuck did she even care? Hasn't her annual allotment of fucks ran out yet?

She flops boneless underneath the surface, giving up on it, letting the water comfort her. What she wouldn't give to be able to stop fretting about shit.

She surfaces when her lungs start screaming, gasping for breath. Her long hair is absolutely everywhere, floating around her like oil-colored tentacles, and she can feel the rapidly cooling droplets sliding down her face, leisurely rolling her across her plump lips and the hollow of her throat.

This is only her sixth day away from things, and already she is going bananas.

Three days later, she is on the coast attempting to drown out the world, literally. She stays underwater for an unheard-of sixteen hours with her new pair of Gills, just sliding around, swimming out as far as she can before her muscles scream for her to stop and she has to begin to surface before her equipment goes out. She doesn't get the bends, but neither does she find peace. It's tranquil as all hell, but it's more like she paused time itself than actually dealt with her issues.

It was great, in a way, to submerge herself in a world of filtered light and weightlessness. Fantastically beautiful as always, to watch the sea life skitter and flash. She spent a good thirty minutes just following a jellyfish, trying to find her zen in its rhythmic pulses. At one point, near the end, she just closed her eyes and let the tide rock her back and forth, letting herself become a piece of debris alongside the sand and stone. Sure, it was great, and she felt a little bit more centered. The pieces in her head all felt aligned, but they all agreed that this was not what she was looking for. This was her joy, her heart, and soul. She went inside the water when she needed to become one with the world and zone out, not when she wanted to work her way through her problems.

On the twelfth day, she is in her home, sitting in front of a mirror. A long time ago, she remembers doing this, right before her unit was sent to the front lines. She had memorized every feature on her face, every laugh line and scratch. She remembers preparing herself, painting her face with ashen warpaint, drawing black lines across her eyes and dotting across her cheekbones and the ridge of her nose.

Looking at her reflection now, a lot has changed.

She isn't wearing the body of a seven year old, for one. Instead she is sixteen. Her hair is longer, reaching to below where the mirror can see, and the combination of time and hormones have changed the soft features of childhood. Her skin is darker than the pale tan she sported back then, shining butterscotch and healthy instead of

sunken and sallow. Her brows better groomed, pointed and shaped, hanging above half-lidded, almond-shaped eyes lined with black. Her lips are larger, full and plump. Her ears are pierced now. Three in her left, one in the lobe and two in the cartilage. One in the lobe of her right ear. Her long, slender neck is crossed with a scar.

Looking closer though, there are lines under her eyes, from stress and poor sleep. Her cheeks have laugh lines, but there are the beginnings of small creases in the corners of her eyes from squinting as well. Her eyes themselves though, they are different. She can't see the pupil, even this close it is hidden inside her black irises. But there is a light in them, though it is dim. She isn't as hopeless as she was. Not even now.

She has more scars than when she started. Pockets and memoirs to remember enemies and allies alike. She has breast of a decent size and shapely, inviting hips. Her arms are muscular and capable, and her abs defined. Her legs are long and toned from training and constant travel.

She looks at herself, compares it to what she was. She is unsure what to feel about it.

Days thirteen, fourteen, and fifteen pass in a daze. She sleeps in her big, empty bed and hopes Misaki got the message she sent about her absence, hopes the traders she knows were discreet enough to give Gaara his letter. She tries to sort things out, but mostly, she tries to dream.

Instead she has nightmares and flashbacks. She finds them unsurprising.

She stalks her empty house on days sixteen and seventeen, going over memories of her old life for days on end, instead of just thinking of them at night. She stares at the portraits of her family, the ones she spent years getting just right. She recalls the sound of their voices, the things they did, the way they smelled. It feels so distant, and that makes her angry and sad too.

Eventually, on day eighteen, she wakes up and find the photograph of her unit looking at her. She stares at it in the oppressive quiet of her house, sees her boys staring at her. The worn bandages around Zabuzza's face, his scruffy hair and deep brown eyes. His tachi on his back. The fond expression on Kisame's features is the final hit though, and she breaks. She cries before she can even get up to brush her teeth and shower. She just covers her head with the blankets, and fucking cries. She hates that too.

On day nineteen, she knows she can't stick around here. She can't do this alone, and the silence and isolation is murdering her gently. Her home has become a tomb, a shrine to the ones she loves. Staying here is awful, and she has to leave.

On day twenty, she sets out with a half-baked plot wedged inside her head.

AN: Orochimaru! You terrifying man with something sorta maybe like compassion for our girl! You tell her how it is! So we see Orochimaru's super intimidating therapy at work in this chapter, we see limits to Ryuishi's influence and drawback to being revered as a Deity, her acknowledging that she's not dealing with her trauma or her emotions, and also an obligatory beginning to a life changing dumb choice. It's gonna be socially weird, because when Ryuishi actually tries to connect with someone she has the social grace of a three legged lizard. I'm super excited about the upcoming chapters because we have it, finally we have it, a peer! A possible confidant? Complete dorks?

I want to thank my readers, favoriters, and followers. I also want to thank My reviewers, your comments really helped me push myself to keep going.

May heaven shine down on my beautiful Beta Enbi, who may, in fact, be something of an actual angel. Thanks for always putting up with my shit, Imouto.

Question: Ryuishi is canonically somebody who gets very flustered when somebody compliments or flirts with her. She can do it, but she can't take it. What sort of soppy, trashy, cuteness does this trait inspire other characters to do and why? AND/OR Send me your Ryuishi headcannons!

Meeting a Deal

I do not own Naruto.

When Hatake Kakashi unlocks the door to his apartment and swings it open, the sight that greets him is not the one he expects. He doesn't know anyone who would expect it, actually. Having a dangerous criminal sitting on his couch, nervously biting her lip, fiddling with files on his coffee table, and wearing the least combat capable outfit he has ever seen pretty much spells out how weird things are in his life right now.

He realizes how true that statement is with frightful clarity when she looks up at him. He knows that according to his new assignment, this is beyond what anyone could have hoped for. He knows that it's almost the perfect segway into establishing diplomatic relations with a foreign power, having her seek him out. It's almost impossibly good luck that after everything that happened, she is here now. He should be pleased.

He isn't. It just proves the Hokage right. For some unseeable reason, he has become the focus of a very capable missing-nin with a laundry list of rumored plots and a trail of blood longer and wider than his own.

"My therapist told me I need to find constructive and healthy outlets for my emotions so I can halt my self-destructive tendencies and reckless behavior. I was put out to pasture and told to avoid stressors," she tells him, without any previous preamble at all.

Kakashi is actually too shocked to answer. It all cycles back to the same thing. There is a criminal, and enemy of Konoha in his house. She just told him she goes to a therapist. She is wearing skin tight three-quarter pants that he didn't even know existed, and what looks like the remains of a regular t-shirt. If a t-shirt had its sleeves ripped

off. Who wore that? More importantly, how did she get into his house and bypass the traps?

"I'm pretty sure that infiltrating an long-standing military-ruled Hidden Village might be, in fact, a stressor though, and waiting for a trained jounin who could be considered an enemy with a history of forcibly detaining me, technically, actually, might be defined as self-destructive behavior."

The groceries hanging from his arm shift as he stares at her with his one grey eye. He just wanted to go out, get some food, and spend a night just reading scrolls. Now there's this. What even is this?

"The only problem though, is that I have no idea what the fuck what to do and am currently losing my mind. What the fuck is a 'healthy' outlet anyway?" she asks, gesturing with the hand that is not nervously fiddling with the file. Her eyes momentarily dart to him, almost manic with tension and energy.

"So I get this plan, to try all this stuff. I do it too, but it doesn't work. I get bored, I get morose, I get depressed and anxious and I can't focus on anything but a cycle of bullshit. No matter how I switch up the variables, it still doesn't work out. I try and fail, over and over again. Then it comes to me, the thing I've been missing. The reason I'm deteriorating like a candle being burned at both ends," she says, rapid fire, almost too quick for him to understand. Her body language is all over the place, a smile working its way in for dramatic effect, followed by a frown, then a brief but annoying session of tapping her foot on the floor. He can't get a read on her, and his own confusion rears its head. She's making him unsure and unstable in his own home.

Kakashi takes a step forward, closing his door behind him. He's pretty sure that no one wants to hear this. He doesn't even want to hear it, but, well, it's sorta his job now. He guesses. Maybe.

"As a person, I am inherently reliant on a social circle to support me. Without those people, all those shitty little figments of my head run

around like nuts, ballz to the walls. I mean, I'm all over the place, and I have all these plans. I'm constantly doing, like, twenty things at once or nothing at all. I need a focus. I need a friend," she babbles. This time her whole body turns to take him in, and he can smell her anxiety in the air with his heightened senses. He is still not quite certain what is happening.

"Wha-?" he tries to interject, but she runs right over him.

"See, that's where you come in. I have no friends, you have no friends. You already tried to kill me, which means we're off to a good start, not to mention, well, the whole saving my life by detaining me. I'm a little torn on that. It would all be great, except for the fact that you are an consummate professional who is completely loyal to your village, and I may, in fact, be somewhat of a wanted criminal. Which means that before we could even get to know each other, your job would be to eliminate me as a threat," she tells him, before tapping her fingers on the folders in front of her.

"I can get around that, though. Without having to economically destroy your shinobi village even, which is awesome, because if I did that it would just cause a lot of hatred and negative emotions. See, I thought and thought and thought what would make it worth your, and your leader's, time. I thought about selling it like a friendship between us would grant Konoha some favor and leeway considering they would gain a powerful asset and ally, but that just seemed, I don't know, scummy?"

Kakashi doesn't respond to that in any way. He wouldn't even know where to begin.

"So instead, I thought about something more tangible to offer. And what do ninja love most? Information, that's what. Here in front of me are three files with data about several very interesting missing-nin, and old Kiri layouts. They can be yours for the very, very cheap price of you attempting to put up with my shit," she finishes with a flourish of her hands upwards like the subject of a surprise party had just entered the room.

Kakashi tries to process everything while Ryuishi watches. She shifts a little, not bothering to reign in her rampant nerves. She's been sitting here forever, hoping this doesn't end in murder. Which, really, is a sure sign that she probably shouldn't be doing it. The thing is, she has been so hungry for friends, starving for companionship, she would do just about anything at this point.

Kakashi is her choice for a number of reasons. He's strong, capable, and she knows that he doesn't die in canon. He's loyal to friends to the point of insanity, and if she ever turns evil, ever loses herself to Orochimaru or her own madness, he can stop her. He did it for Obito, and if she could secure a platonic relationship with him, she has no doubt he would do it for her. She would make him fight for it, to be sure, but with resources from the village and a good team he could do it. The fact that it is so risky and troublesome just means he won't do it on a whim.

Not to mention that if she can turn him into a friend, she can get close to the man who may end up Zabuza's killer. She can stop him before he can even get close to her beautiful monster, and if need be cut him down. She likes him, but if it comes down to it, Zabuza was hers first.

Disregarding the fact that Hatake Kakashi is a highly respected jounin, known for his skill and genius in battle, he's also socially isolated. Save for a few others who only showed up periodically, Hatake had a habit of keeping things strictly professional. And she knows this fucker, knows his whole life story, knows who he was and who he will be. She is familiar with his special brand of tragedy. She knows the baggage that he has, and is totally willing to accept it. Just so long as he does the same.

(Well, not *all* her baggage.)

The man shifts slightly, considering it. She almost holds her breath, but settles for biting her lip. If he attacks, she will need that breath.

"I'm going to put these groceries away. I bought frozen meat, and I don't want it to thaw," he says finally. The answer throws her for a loop, and she is sure her expression is one of bewilderment. What the fuck is that supposed to mean? Is he accepting or not? What the fuck?

The worse part is that he totally does just that. Like, he just walks into his kitchen and begins putting things away, disabling traps on cupboards and cabinets. Just acting like she isn't here, going about his evening. Not even answering her question! Ryuishi did not travel at breakneck speeds, sneak through a sewer, and avoid guard patrols for this. She didn't agonize over which information she could give away without harming her own plans or estranging allies so she could be ignored. She did not infiltrate his apartment and village at great risk to her personal health for Hatake not to answer her motherfucking proposal.

Her mind switches gears for a moment. Proposal makes it sound like a marriage, which is gross. Work on that, brain. Actually, get her shit together brain. Know what? Do both, brain, do both of those things.

She switches back, ripping her eyes away from the man to stare at the files, the long bangs framing her either side of her face dangling in her view and tickling her collarbone. Is it enough? It's more than she would ever give away freely, true, but she is hoping to come out of this with something. Does this count as buying friendship? Friend prostitution? Does she care if it does?

Her hands clench periodically into fists before she reminds herself she's trying to be non-threatening. It doesn't stop her from shifting again though. It's good if she's obvious right now. It shows she's being honest or some shit. Partially honest? Like, maybe half-truths? Okay, probably more like sixty percent truths, but that doesn't sound as good.

The inside of her head is basically all the parts of her screaming incoherently for a long moment. She hears movement behind her, carefully calculated footsteps, and then Hatake is sitting on the other

end of the couch, not looking her in the eye. There is an awkwardly large space between them, she thinks. He reaches out a hand and takes a file.

Ryuishi's entire face lights up with earth-shattering joy. The pact has been made.

She makes a stifled choking sound and leans over to embrace the man, her new friend. Overcome with powerful positive emotions, she wraps her arms around his chest and brings him in for a good old-fashioned hug.

"Oh man, you won't regret this," she happily tells the overly stiff and unmoving body. Little does she know that Kakashi has regretted meeting her the moment he looked at her with his Sharingan eye.

"Please do not touch me," he answers, but he is too late. Way too late.

Eventually Kakashi gets the girl to let go, more uncomfortable than he can remember being in a long time. She seems to finally put a cap on whatever euphoria is spilling out of her and reclaims her place on the other side of the sofa, determinedly staring straight ahead, pretending to be uninterested in his actions.

The man in question skims over the files, memorizing the gifts of information. The movement patterns of several rogues along with favored haunts and preferred clients; their techniques and weapons, alongside their ranks and last known whereabouts, all with references that can be cross-checked for reliability and authenticity. He doesn't even open the dossier on Kiri, and he's already overwhelmed. This sort of information could be sold for small fortunes and collecting such a large amount of data would be exhausting. This is just a taste, a tiny hint of what she can get her hands on.

He finally understands why the Hokage is willing to gamble so much.

He places the folder back down, stacking them all in a neat and orderly pile before reaching for what happens next. He isn't sure there's a protocol for this, or any steps that are generally taken. He isn't even sure on how one would cultivate a normal friendship, let alone one as dangerous as this.

"So," he states to the open air. She turn her head back to look at him and he is struck again with how utterly weird this all is.

"Uh," she answers awkwardly.

He nods in understanding, and then he immediately berates himself. Why did he just nod? What is he doing? That was suspicious, wasn't it? What if she suspects? Silence reigns unchallenged for a moment.

"Er, I guess I uh, never introduced myself," she says, and her eyes dart away from his for a moment, like she's gathering her thoughts. When they come back up, she is looking him straight in the eye.

"I'm Watanabe Ryuishi. I, um, like food, understanding shit, and laughing. I dislike er, uh, people being dicks, I guess. My goals for the future are, ah, tons of things. I really want to try to kick someone's ass in fantasy girl armor once. It seems like it would be empowering," she says, bowing her head slightly. "Please take care of me."

Kakashi is hit with a sucker punch of nostalgia so hard he almost chokes. Instead of doing that, he finds himself asking-

"What is fantasy girl armor?"

"It's uh, a ridiculous sort of protection that often times is made out of flowy fabric or a skin-baring suit. I just think that if I can stomp a person in a metal bikini then I can kick ass in anything, you know?" she answers.

"Is that... something from Kiri?" he asks, lost. She laughs, and the throaty, belly-shaking sound fills his home.

"No, oh my God no," she huffs out enthusiastically, eager for conversation. "Didn't you read that file?"

He doesn't answer, instead picking up the one folder he has not touched as if to confirm its absence in her report. The suddenly jovial looking girl is lost again.

What the fuck? Does he not understand basic human interaction? Did he think she was mocking him? Sweet goddess Kali slicing watermelon, how socially inept was this man? She watches in confusion as he stares at the words, his one grey eye completely focused on the task at hand.

Unbeknownst to her, Kakashi tries to ignore the fact that he has minimal experience in long-term infiltration missions. His specialty was assassination, not sabotage or intel. He stares uncomprehendingly at the ink on the pages, asking himself how he must seem in the moment. Belatedly, he realizes that she didn't intend for him to pick up the folder and read her report, but rather was asking a rhetorical question. It's too late though, he can't put it back down or it will be double as strange. Now he has to act like he's reading files he's sure should remain out of his knowledge until the Hokage tells him otherwise.

Kakashi briefly entertains the fantasy that this isn't happening. That instead of this he came home to an empty apartment, put away his groceries and settled in for a night of reading mission scrolls. He pretends that an insane girl never took notice of him, he never made a fool of himself and remained sober that night, and that he was never surrounded by an ambush of hunter-nin and then saved by said insane girl.

His eyes dart over to the woman, and he nearly scrambles out of his own home. "Is that-" he begins to ask, stunned.

"Hmm?" she returns, looking up from a conspicuously orange-covered novel, "Oh, don't mind me. Go ahead and read, and I'll do

the same. No point in talking until you secure the information first. Sorry about trying, I didn't realize you hadn't."

His eyes are glued to the book. She's reading porn. The Rakki Ryuu reads porn. In his house, on his couch, attempting to sooth over his social faux pas, and he is one hundred percent certain that she is doing a poor job of it because *that is porn* .

"You read that?" he asks, and his voice sounds strangled and faint to his own ears. She scrunches her brows together inquisitively as she looks at him.

"Yah, don't you?" she says. He is uncertain whether he should be insulted or not. Does he look like the sort of person who would do that?

"No," he says faintly. Her eyebrows raise in surprise, then lower in consideration again, like she's thinking something over. Whatever she is asking herself, she seems to find her answer. Slowly, gently, she closes the cover and holds it out for him.

Ryuishi has no idea when he started reading these things in canon, but guessing by his reaction, it wasn't until later. Honestly, she's a little shocked herself. If she was an adolescent/teenage boy, this would have been her first choice for spank bank material. Apparently, she is alone in this.

She was faced with a choice, to let things things continue on, or to change them. Watching him dazedly accept the book with his free hand, she counts it as a success. Fuck canon. She did this. She's a trendsetter.

"Thank you," he says distantly, and she smiles to herself. She knew she didn't forget how to do this friend stuff. Friends share literotica with friends, right?

What follows is another inordinately long silence, which is only broken when Ryuishi declares, "We should play Uno."

Kakashi has no idea what Uno is, and is wary of it at first. There is no 'Uno' in his bank of knowledge, and he is cautious of playing any games that a missing-nin might play. He'd be suspicious of it if she was just a regular Mist-nin.

She makes blatant, unrepentant eye contact with him for a few seconds, waiting for some sort of answer. He gives none, but she reaches into her bag anyway. The bag hidden by the other end of the couch. He wonders once more how the hell she got into his house.

She digs around for a moment in one of the side pockets before procuring a beaten and worn casing around what looks like a set of home made cards. He finds himself mildly surprised at the benign nature of them. Then again, they could be used as throwing weapons in a pinch. This could still be an obscure murder attempt.

"Er... You're not colorblind, right?" she asks and he shoots her a glance.

"No."

"Oh. Cool. So Uno is a card game," she states, and he can see how she winces at her obvious statement, "and you get seven cards you have to hide from your opponent. You have to either match the number or color of the card placed before you, though there are other types as well, but they're kinda self explanatory. If you don't have a match you draw from the pile."

He nods in understanding and she begins to slide onto the floor. In complete silence she shuffles to sit on the other side of the coffee table, deck in hand. He takes a moment to remind himself that somehow, this is his life now. Playing card games based on colors and numbers with missing-nin who sit on the floor like children.

"Anyway, I've found that ninja enjoy trying to cheat, so if you could not do that, it would be super cool, because then we just end up stealth training."

"Ah," he responds elegantly.

"I'll go first because reasons," she says after that, and she lays down a red card with a four on it. Carefully, he sets down a green with the same character.

It takes him a few play throughs to understand what is actually required of him, and during the third game he is tempted to burn the 'draw four' card. Along the way, he notices how weird it is, how seemingly normal. When is the last time he has played a card game? When is the last time he socialized with another person? He doesn't know.

All he knows is that she moves a lot, shifting and tapping and lounging around, constantly changing position. Her face is relaxed, and she seems to be calm, but her body keeps trying to relieve some sort of nervous energy. Kakashi lays down a yellow seven and says nothing.

He memorizes the deck by game four and plays accordingly, winning by a large margin. Then again, because there is a lack of things to do. She loses poorly, flinging herself to the ground before snatching up her bag and commandeering his bathroom. He hears water running, and beyond all belief, she has disabled the shuriken trap and begins taking a shower. Kakashi seizes his chance, flashing through a number of hand-signs and creating a clone to bring the files and a coded message back to the Hokage. He should take them himself, but he currently is entertaining a... guest? What was she?

He doesn't know. He finds himself not knowing a lot of things when it comes to her. She's a tangle of contradictions and emotions, swaying precariously back and forth between genius and madness.

He is lost as he ponders his next move. He can hear her humming softly through the walls, and he bets she's doing it on purpose. No trained kunoichi would make that much noise otherwise.

How is he supposed to foster amicable relations and get her to trust him? It would be one thing if they had just continued on the path she had set out on, exchanging acts of goodwill without actually ever speaking. It would be more comfortable as well, keeping that professional distance.

He wonders if she ever properly had those wounds healed, or if they simply joined the ranks of scars on her skin. If she was given access to medical care, would it be accepted well?

He needed her to indebted to him... no, that was wrong. He needed her to be concerned with him, with his cause and country. Debts could be paid off, compassion and care was something that would be harder to get rid of. The Hokage had tasked him with this mission, of commissioning a bond between this outside power and his village.

He briefly thought of what Obito would have done in his place. His old teammate would have clung on, carving out a place in her heart whether she wanted it or not. Through insults and tears he would have reeled her in like a fish on a hook. He was good at that. Kakashi was not.

He heard fumbling through the humming, the sound of someone rummaging through a pack. Before long his bathroom door opened and she was there again, pants replaced with the world's shortest shorts and the same shirt hanging off her shoulders, wet hair hanging loose.

"By the way, I made absolutely no plans on where I was staying. Hope it's cool if I crash here," she announces, and he almost falls off the couch.

What has his life become?

AN: AH! THE CONTRACT HAS BEEN SEALED. LET THE DORK GAMES BEGIN. RYUISHI IN YOGA PANTS AND CUTT-OFF MUSCLE SHIRTS. These two nerds should be renamed, btw, as

the 'What is normal human interaction club' or maybe 'awkward eye contact club'. Seriously though, things are coming. Things and awkward stuff. This is the weirdest human interaction, I swear. Still no ramnce planned though.

Now that this is done, I have been reminded by my ever wonderful to tell everybody that there is a podfic! Done by that same super gorgeous beta! Love them! Cherish them! Not only that, but I have fanart from some wonderful, fabulous, clever readers as well! AHHHHH! AHHH! Both can be found on my profile page! I also have an accompaniment story to this one, called 'Songs Gone Unsung' now! Check it out!

I want to thank my readers, my favoriters, and my followers. Bless your face. Also want to thank my Reviewers. You guys quench the thirst in my soul. Love you.

MY SUPER AWESOME BETA ENBI DESERVES EVERYTHING. SHE DID THIS WHILE SICK. LOVE THEMMMMM.

Question: Somehow, somebody got photo's of Ryuishi's, Tenzo's, and Kakashi's first brawl. Who gets them and how do they react? Or Who overhears Ryuishi singing and how do they feel about it?

Meeting an Unanticipated Skill

I do not own Naruto.

"Wake up."

Ryuishi, somewhere in a sleepy haze, ignores this, instead grinding her face deeper into the fabric of her bedding, the sofa the two of them sat on the night before. She clings tighter to the sensation of unconsciousness, letting her tired mind rest a bit more. Flashes of dreamscape flit past her eyes. A sandy beach with overcast skies greets her, the calming sound of the waves lulling her back under. There's a nice break, she thinks distantly, perfect for longboarding. Somewhere, she knows her father and brothers are fishing, and behind her she is sure her mother and sister are lounging in the sand.

A wave crashes against her as she stands on the border line between land and water, her feet burrowing in the sand. Gritty grains slip in between her toes and she relishes in the feel of it sliding around, rubbing away at the thick calluses on her soles. It is nice here, safe and familiar. Later they will go to the restaurant on the pier, a time honored tradition of her family when they visit. She can almost taste the oysters on the half shell now, slick and briny against her tongue.

"How long do you plan on sleeping?" the voice calls again. It comes out of Zabuza's mouth, but it isn't his voice. He's standing to her right, a man grown, Kubikiribocho strapped to his back. His fingers feel hot and rough as they tangle with her own. She can feel another hand, large and strong, in her left, their thumb rubbing circles on her skin. Her head turns slowly, and Kisame is there, dwarfing her with his height. Samehada burbles something, and he raises his brow playfully at her without words. Her heart is content, surrounded by the wind and waves, holding the hands of her boys, her family safe

behind her. She feels peaceful, more joyous and tranquil than she can ever remember being.

Forever, if I can have this, she wants to say, but she isn't sure if they hear it. That's okay though, because their hands are joined with hers and she feels safe and warm.

"Wake up," somebody says again, and her brain falters. That is Hatake's voice. The scene blurs and begins to slip away, fading into the darkness that is the back of her eyelids. She can feel a groan escape her lips before she even has time to register it. She blinks, and then she peels her face off of the couch cushion, pushing herself up with her arms to see over the back of the sofa. She squints, her vision blurred, and makes out the image of a fully dressed and ready-to-go Kakashi.

"What fuckin' time is it?" she slurs out, her voice thick with sleep. Her hair is free, falling all around her. She gave up putting it in braids a while back. It got harder to do as it grew out.

"Late," he tells her. "Almost six in the morning."

She reels back slowly, registering his words. She yawns, shifting her weight back more so she can sit on her rear. A single hand come up as she inhales, rubbing at her eye.

"Six?" she asks. He doesn't say anything, but she can see him nod out of the corner of her eye.

"Nope," she tells him, right before letting herself fall forward again, covering her head with the blanket. Six more hours of sleep, more like. She hears footsteps, and then somebody tugs on her covers. She whines piteously in her throat, curling into a ball, fabric clutched tight in her hand.

"Get up, it's already late," he tells her. It is late, to him. He doesn't understand why she needs any more rest. A capable shinobi can run off of less. Is he pushing too hard? Is this too fast? He doesn't know.

Social interaction is not one of his many, many strong points. He can admit that. Surely six hours of sleep is enough, right?

"Late for *what*?" she whines at the eighteen year old.

"Morning training. I should have been at the grounds at six, but I decided to sleep in today," he informs her, and what he doesn't tell her is why he made that choice. It turns out that having a criminal asleep on one's couch is not conducive for a good night's sleep. Even after sending another clone and trapping his bedroom he had found it almost impossible to achieve anything but the light rest of a field mission.

That being said, it was strange to witness such a powerful unknown sleep on his couch. She had requested no bedding, and had pulled a meticulously clean bedroll out to lay over her, a soft cushion from seemingly nowhere resting under her head. In sleep she looked different. She still didn't look like a teenager, but her butterscotch skin evened out as muscles let go of the tension from the day before. It was enlightening to see her like that, mouth open and breathing even. No legendary figure slept so undignified and no missing nin slept so soundly. He had watched as she drifted off, and then wondered how she could do it in front of him like that. A sign of trust, or a sign that she had rested under worse supervision in even worse places.

Even now she looks undignified, disoriented, and dare he say grumpy, at being woken. A tight ball wrapped in a blanket and mumbling curses isn't very intimidating.

"Fuckin' six in the damn mornin' is late? You done lost your mind," she tells him groggily.

"Up," he tells her, pulling on the blankets again. How old is she, four? Is she mentally regressing? Is this a normal occurrence for her? He does not know, so he waits, nervously telling himself that this is normal now. He is in total control of this situation.

"Suck my dick," she returns, and he most assuredly does not signal his distress at that. He hopes that she is merely jesting. Surely she is actually female. She smells female. Is it strange that he knows that? He is beginning to notice how dramatic she is acting though, and acts accordingly. He pulls tighter on the blanket, and she whines yet again. The noise grates on his nerves. She is the one who walked in here and upset his routine. She is the one who focused on him. She is the reason he is later than usual.

He tears the blanket away in a spat of anger, and she tumbles out, nearly slamming her head on the table, nimbly dodging in the last second. She lays there, limbs askew, and he relishes in the silence. For a moment, he thinks he has gone too far and ruined everything. Then one of her arms raises from the ground, middle finger standing tall above a fist. Relief floods him.

"Very mature," he states, and she tucks and rolls, snatching her bag up in a tired but fluid movement.

"I'm taking another shower," she snaps back, walking towards the restroom, and he becomes confused.

"Didn't you already take one last night?" he asks, even though he knows it to be true. He does not understand why another would be necessary.

"I just rinsed!" she answers before disappearing. This isn't anymore of an answer than the initial statement.

He drops his head into his hands, stewing in the silence. It can't take more than fifteen minutes, right?

Wrong.

At the fifteen minute mark, the shower is still running, and that holds true after twenty minutes as well. He has no idea what could possibly take so long. Admittedly, she has a lot of hair, but even with all of that, she should have been done forever ago. It brings to mind a

question he has never thought of before: what do girls do in the shower? He's heard rumors that this is a trait shared by some of the gender, though it is a blanket statement, to be sure. The only problem is, he isn't quite sure.

The water shuts off at thirty minutes, and he is annoyed and relieved. A few minutes and the door opens, scented steam billowing out of it, but no woman to follow.

He becomes agitated again. What could possibly be happening in there? He gets up, determined to find out.

What he sees doesn't confuse him, but he doesn't understand it either. Is she... painting her face? Why is she wearing a dress?

"What are you doing?" he asks. Ryuishi blinks and finishes copying the contour that Misaki and the gang had given her before. It's going to take a lot of work on her own, and if Kakashi thinks she's training after this, then he has another thing coming.

"Uh, getting ready?" she answers, cleaning the blending sponges and looking for the setting spray. His counter looks like a salon exploded on it, hair products and make-up everywhere. She maybe feels a twinge of regret for messing it up, but only briefly, because the scandalized expression she can see in his eye makes her want to laugh. The tension and nervousness of the night before is beginning to melt away as she embraces the the bizarreness of her situation.

She hums, taking pity on him and gesturing to the long sun dress and towel on her head, turning back to her mirror so she can attempt to re-create her persona.

"I don't go around as myself all the time. That would be asking to be cut down. In Konoha I'm not the Rakki Ryu or Watanabe Ryuishi, I'm... well, I guess some other person. It's easier to blend in and not be noticed, and I hide my features with gratuitous use of makeup and clothing. Nobody expects a missing nin to be wearing a

sundress on the street in the middle of their Hidden Village, so nobody finds one," she tells him. He looks warily at the products on the counter.

"Does it always take so long?" he asks. She rolls her eyes and turns to him.

"Listen here, Hatake. I don't know what you do in the shower, but me? I have to shampoo my hair, then lather up soap and scrub myself, then rinse, work conditioner through like three and a half feet of hair, put it up to absorb in, cover myself in shaving cream, then shave my legs, underarms, and manscape, rinse that all away, then wash my face with a special soap. Then, after I get out of the shower, I have to moisturize my body, get started on makeup, and then style my hair. I have no idea what you do when bathing, but come bitch at me when it's not the asscrack of dawn and you have to put up with this crap," she explains, turning to put on her eyeliner.

The man says nothing. He simply focuses his attention on the strange looking tube sitting beside him. It is colorful and bright, but so are many of the mysterious tubes. Is this a disguise thing, or a her thing? He does not know.

"How much longer?"

She huffs out, finishing a subtle line, and he thinks that he would never feel comfortable with a sharpened pencil so close to his vulnerable retina.

"I don't know why you're rushing. It's not like I can follow you. As far as everybody knows, I am a random civilian, and civilians do not go to training grounds. Unless, of course, you want to go without me and leave me to my own devices," she huffs out, holding a strange and painful-looking device to her eyelashes.

Kakashi pauses. He assumed that they would train, and he would gather further information on her combat capabilities. Knowing she had an established civilian cover ruined that plan, and he was left

adrift. What else was he supposed to do in the mornings, other than train? There's no way he can leave a missing-nin unsupervised in the village.

"What did you do as this person?" he asks. The question is double edged, a way to find out activities to do and to figure out what she did while she was here.

Ryuishi blinks, dabbing on a lighter colored lip stain than usual. It's not as perfect and effortlessly glamorous like Misaki's had been, but it's definitely not her normal look. Everything is softer, more homely and... well, feminine. Like, maybe she had a garden and liked going out on picnics or some shit. All she needed to do was braid her hair and Ryuishi would look like the poster girl for unassuming civilian teenage girl going about her day.

"Honestly? That leading-ass question is what you're going to ask me?" She answers his question with a pointed query of her own, untying the towel from her hair and brushing it through. She knows she should let it dry first, but Mr. Silver Hair has ants in his pants, and she is getting tired of his nagging. He doesn't answer, and she sighs.

"Let me finish in here, and we can go to the farmer's market. You can come with me and witness as I gather ingredients for breakfast and make sure they aren't poisoned or whatever," she says, gently pulling a tangle loose.

"Farmer's market," he responds in a bland tone.

"Yah, a fucking farmers market. You got me up up early, and this is what you're going to get in return. A bitchy, grumpy fucking girl who is going to make herself and her new friend breakfast, because that's what friends do. They go to farmer's markets and buy organic vegetables and brown eggs or some shit, and then they eat meals together."

At least, she thinks they do. Maybe?

Ryuishi, still grumpy and groggy at the early-ass hour of seven fucking o'clock or some shit, looks out at the bustling market with some sort of trepidation, fiddling with the strip of ribbon covering the scar on her neck. It sounded so safe and clear in theory, but the execution is different.

Stalls line the side of the street, covered by overhangs and awnings, all sorts of things on display. Even at the buttcrack of dawn, these assholes are all cheer and smiles in the open air. She can see some of them taper off into a warehouse of sorts, a steady stream of shoppers out to get the best deals even now.

She stops, intimidated. She has a flashback of the world before this one, where her mother dragged her out to chaos of early saturday shopping in chinatown. Back then it had been exciting and exotic, but as she grew older, it became more intimidating. She had forgotten the tenacity of old asian women and the manipulation of cunning children of all kinds. She was weak against their ferocious haggling and pushy peddling ways then, and she doesn't think that has changed now.

She swallows audibly, and glances at the man beside her. He seems relaxed, but she can see the tightness around his eye. Hatake is just as lost as she is.

"I think we should try a normal, commercialized shop instead," she whispers. He glances at her, and she doesn't know what he is thinking.

"I've never seen so many Akimichi outside of the clan compound," he informs her. Ryuishi looks out again, and her eyes are open. The farmers' stalls selling a rainbow of produce and the wagons from out of town traders are the only ones without swirled cheeks. Every person running a cooked food stall bears the telltale facial marks of the illustrious Akimichi clan. Suddenly, her trepidation seems more founded in reality. Not only are these aggressive peddlers, they are

ninja as well. Ninja merchants, twice as cutthroat as their competitors.

The worst part is that they all look so fucking happy.

Ryuishi bravely takes a few steps forward, trying to merge with the crowd and melt away into oblivion. "Meat buns, get your meat buns!" somebody shouts to her left. She flinches and bumps into Hatake, startled by the insane amount of noise that one person can create. She's surprised that the whole town isn't awake after that nonsense. In turns, he casts his lofty, judging gaze down on her.

"Remember, we need duck eggs, scallions, beef, flour, curry powder and bird-eye chiles. Nothing more than that," she tells her companion stiffly.

"What kind of breakfast has that?" he asks. She huffs out, letting her eyes scan the crowd for somebody with what she wants. Not too far away, she can see a produce stall lined with peppers, so maybe they can get the chiles there?

"Martabak telur. Like, savory Martabak, not martabak manis," she says, letting her feet carry her to her goal.

"I have never heard of that," he tells her, and she wants to roll her eyes. Of course he has never heard of it. It's not a dish from this world. She resents that fact, because it means it is approximately six thousand times harder to get her hands on sambal now.

"It's like a savory er... shit, you have no idea what a pancake is... Okay, it's like a minced meat and vegetable mix stuffed inside a pan fried dough. A little like Okonomiyaki? Hm," she says, coming up to the stall, eyeing the peppers. She notes at least three different kinds of banana peppers, some everyday bells, a strange star shaped chile thing before the thai chiles catch her eye. She smiles victoriously, turning the bag inside out over her hand as she scans them. She has no idea what the fuck she is looking for, but she figures if she looks like she does, nobody will assume otherwise.

Funnily enough, that mentality is the basis of about sixty percent of her day. She picks out what she wants and finally looks up at the vendor, who meets her eyes challengingly. The woman is older, and that terrifies Ryuishi.

"How much?" she asks, and she knows she has already failed. She was supposed to offer a price first, then they would haggle. Now she is the weak one. The old woman can smell her fear. She knows she can.

"Six hundred and twenty ryo," she says with a gloating smile. Ryuishi reels back. That's like five bucks for a handful of chiles!

"One twenty," she counters. The woman frowns and clicks her teeth at her. She can almost feel the sweat beginning to form on her brow. She has seen so many terrible things, but somehow, pushy old women still scare her.

"Those seeds came from Taki. It wasn't easy to grow them, either. Six hundred," she bites out. Ryuishi can feel her resolve crumbling. Taki is a long ways away, and the old woman is but a humble farmer.

"Each pepper produces even more seeds. I'll give you two hundred."

"More seeds for next year, not this one. Five forty."

"It's only a handful of them. That's insane. Two fifty."

The woman meets her eyes, and her grey hair glints in the rising sun. Ryuishi feels like the woman can see into her very soul.

"I'll drop it down to four fifty because I like your spirit, but no more than that. I have grandchildren back home to feed," she spits.

Ryuishi folds and hands over the cash silently, while her friend looks on. She begs her mother for forgiveness in her head. That woman certainly didn't raise her to be so weak willed. Hopefully Hatake will not condemn her for her scant haggling skills.

The process gets worse as they go on. The others have seen her poor showing and can scent out the new girl with deep pockets, and the duck eggs end up costing fifty percent more than usual because of 'the poor hatching season year before last'. Even though she knows that's a crock of shit, she buys them anyway. She doesn't want to give these hard-working people any trouble, and also for some reason shopkeepers intimidate the piss out of her. All this happens under Hatake's weighty, judgmental gaze.

"I am so hungry," she whines, directing her eyes to Kakashi. "I cannot wait to eat." Even the bag of overpriced ingredients on her arms is not enough to dissuade her from whining.

Apparently though, she was not discreet enough with her complaints, because a laugh comes to life on her right. She has time to cast a helpless, wide eyed look at Kakashi before an aggressively happy Akimichi spins her round, sending the skirt of her dress flaring out.

"Why wait?" he practically bellows, his gigantic hand gesturing to his stall. It smells wonderful, like maybe how sin feels.

"I was going to make breakfast at home-" she tries to say, but the cheerful fat man laughs again, grabbing her arm with his other, equally enormous hand. His fingers wrap all the way around her arm, and she is not small by any means. She squashes down an impending flashback with a surge of vicious willpower.

"Do both! Why not eat some delicious yakisoba before you go on your way?" he asks.

"I spent my money on ingredients, sorry," she attempts. The man smiles and turns his eyes on the young Kakashi.

"Ah, but he didn't! What kind of man lets a cute little rabbit like this pay for a meal she will be cooking for him?" he asks, and she can practically hear Hatake's defensiveness. She also doesn't know whether to be insulted or not. Little rabbit? What the shit is that?

"I-" Kakashi attempts, but the man cuts him off with a wave of his hand. Suddenly, she is very amused. Also hesitant, and wary, but mostly confused. A lot is happening. So many people. Great mother Frejya, how long has it been since she's heard three people talk at once?

"A small snack will not harm a growing girl like her. In fact, I must insist. She's withering away. See how my fingers touch when placed around her arm?" And, really, that is more of a comment on how colossal he is rather than how small she is. Still though, what the fuck about her says cute rabbit?

"Sir, we were just-" Hatake tries, but the man is shaking his head. Ryuishi is more delighted and bewildered than she has been in a while.

"To think, a shinobi of my own village would let a fine lady like this go hungry," the Akimichi says in a forlorn voice. Ryuishi wants to snort. First a fucking bunny, now a lady? This guy was awesome. She has doubts about Hatake thinking the same and attempts to save him.

"Sir, thank you so much, but I have everything for the martabak and it will be quick to-" she says, but he turns back to face her, his wild hair surrounding him like a lion.

"What was that?" he asks.

"Er, martabak?" she tries, and she sees a fire in the man's eyes.

"And what is in that dish?" he inquires, his full attention on her. Thinking on it, it probably wasn't a great idea to bring up a mysterious dish to a food-loving person. In fact, she is almost certain it's how she ended up inside the kitchen apparently connected to the back of his stall, preparing breakfast while the Akimichi looks eagerly on.

"Your knife work is beautiful," he tells her, and she preens under his compliment, still confused as all hell. Mostly though, she tries to go

with the flow.

"Thank you! I have to say, it's mostly because this knife is so good. Where did you get such a well-made santoku?" she asks, rapidly sliding through the shallots. Way easier to cut through than human fingers, but not as stiff and satisfying. The man hums in thought, while he beats the eggs with an enviable skill.

"Oh, there is a blacksmith in a town near Iwa-" he begins, and she smiles at him, wide and bright. Kakashi watches the two dance through the kitchen in a daze, briefly wondering if things like this happened often to her. She acts like it was nothing to be invited into the kitchen to prepare a dish for a stranger.

Where did she even learn to cook? She had told him herself that her mother had been a sex worker, and while he knows the two are not exclusive things, he also knows that Kiri had almost none of these ingredients at the time of her birth. Outside trade was sparse, and a seafood diet with little spice would be ordinary. Yet here she is, cooking like she has been doing it for years. The mundane nature of the skill astounds him. She has woven a web of blood and secrets, has become powerful enough to challenge nations, but she cooks like a mother with years of experience. There is no burning smell, or soggy squish, only the sound of sizzling meat and sharp snap of spice.

She flashes a smile at him while the enamored Akimichi watches her add the shallots to the pan with the beef and stir it with a pair of long chopsticks. The eighteen year old is struck again by how absolutely unassuming she looks. He would have never thought that paint, a braid, and a long sundress could change a person so much. He supposes that this is why they never caught her in action. She wasn't acting like a kunoichi infiltrating, or a shinobi sneaking around. She was here, mingling with non-combatants like she belonged with them.

Dangerous, he thinks, she's dangerous.

Kakashi has seen the mangled remains of hunter-nin himself; he has smelt the ripe air and walked among the wreckage she had wrought. He has witnessed her strange chakra and experienced her instability first hand. It is wrong, to see her and find nothing but a harmless teenager chatting away with a stall keeper. It is a lie of the greatest proportions.

She turns to him, a plate in her hand, and smiles. Kakashi takes it while the large man crows in delight over this new culinary discovery.

"So meaty and filling! And the spice wakes up the senses. Tell me, are there more dishes like this?" the Akimichi man asks. She laughs, and he thinks it sounds just a touch too light to be true.

"Tons! There's a sweet version of this recipe, and skewers, and curries. and so much more. I can write down a few recipes if you want," she offers.

The man reaches out and clasps her hands in his. Kakashi notes the tightness in her shoulders and taut neck, like a snake ready to strike. Dangerous, he thinks again. The man came to her, and she needed to expend little to no effort to end him.

"Little rabbit, you stop by anytime! It would be a delight to cook with you again!" he tells her, and Kakashi realizes that he has just witnessed her work first hand. This is how she converts so many so fast. She blends in and shares their interests, becomes human, becomes likable, and then she offers them something they cannot refuse.

The food she made is delicious and filling, better than he can remember consuming for a long time. It is savory, like she said, but pleasantly spiced and warm in his hands. He has to blank his face to hide his reactions. It is good, more than good really, but the lingering oil in his mouth burns him.

AN: So! Not so awkward, but more tense! The two begin a clumsy and inelegant dance of 'what the fuck are you doing?' and 'Who the fuck are you really?' all while attempting to act like rational, reasonable, normal friends. Who knows what's going on? I don't! That being said, we all know Ryuishi is a terrible morning person. Also, that she feels uncomfortable and confrontational around Hatake, who feels wary and eat food. Delicious Indonesian street food. Also, trying to figure out how to put more dick jokes in here...

AHHH! I GOT FANART! CHECK OUT THE LINKS ON MY PROFILE!

I would like to thank my lurkers, my favoriters, and my followers. My reviewers have earned a special place in my heart, and all your words encourage me. Thank you.

I'd like to thank my beta, Enbi, who was sick and still talked with me and edited this.

Question: How do you think the various characters would react/treat to the unassuming and, dare I say, domestic version of sundress wearing civilian Ryuishi? Or! Who finds our capable heroine asleep in the woods, and what happens?

Meeting a Morbid Peepshow

I do not own Naruto.

Ryuishi breathes in deep, feels the air rush into her lungs and inflate them like a balloon, tastes the faint earthiness of the air, and holds it. She imagines every one of her hurts and pains, every trigger and stressor, and she breathes them out, imagining the rush of air between her lips is a scream.

This is too easy, she thinks. Something is going on that she can't see. Somebody is trying to manipulate her and move her around. She should be dead a hundred times over, locked up with a Yamanaka scouring through her mind. She should be in chains, or maimed, or have her tongue cut out or some shit.

Eyes closed, mimicking meditation, she doesn't care. Not really. All her stressors are there, for sure, but also she's finding it really hard to muster up a fuck to give. Even playacting at friendship is about a billion times better than hanging around by herself. Or tiptoeing around whatever the hell she and Orochimaru have going on. Hell, she's even kinda glad that she doesn't have to go out and recruit anymore Mumei for now.

She misses Gaara and Naruto, though. She misses the feeling of them snuggled up to her and their big, clear eyes and happy kid sounds. She misses the way Naruto never stops moving, and the way Gaara absentmindedly fiddles with his clothes.

She breathes in, then lets out a high pitched whine. Her cute little babies, more precious than plushies. Her adorable little brothers, so soft with that little kid smell.

Oh man, that was creepy, she thinks. She's getting creepy.

Then she thinks of the newest one, the little sourpuss with bags full of trauma and big Harry Potter glasses. He might not be hers, per se, but she's totally his senpai. Oh lord, what if he calls her that? She'll explode. Oh man, little kids and their gigantic dorky ways and their dumb faces and tiny hands. Holy shit.

She gives up pretending and covers her flushed face with her hands, rolling around in the grass like a loser.

"What are you doing?" Hatake asks, pausing in his carefully-calculated-to-not-give-anything-away katas.

It's morning again, and after two days of skipping, the young man bodily dragged her to the training grounds against her will. She didn't come easy either, kicking and squirming and whining the whole way. He's tenacious, she'll give him that. Somehow sneaking her in here, and trust her, she checked for watchers, couldn't have been easy. She made sure it wasn't. Six in the fucking morning...

"Important stuff. Go back to your dumb training," she tells him, face hidden behind her hands and pressed into the grass.

"You can join me," he offers again, and she scoffs, returning to a sitting position, face wiped clear of expression. Her head is full of images of her happy sunshine playing with his newest toy and her little Gaara and his magnificent lost expression.

She leans her head back to look up at the sky, her arms out behind her to steady her. Her dress rides up a bit and she takes a moment to appreciate not wearing pants. Ah, the breeze touching her thighs.

"Hatake, I don't think you have any idea what you're asking," she says.

The man doesn't answer at first, moving through his forms with an impressive speed. She wonders what the fitness nut is thinking.

"I've sparred with other people before. I can tell the difference between mission and training," he states. He says it like she's scared of facing him, upset that he might hurt her or kill her on accident.

"I can't," she admits. The statement seems to perk his interest and, he angles his head to look at her. She shrugs and pretends it isn't a big deal, picking at the grass between her fingers.

"Kiri didn't teach us that. In the Academy, the only rules were to either make it a quick death or to not maim them for life. When I practiced with my partner-" She thinks of spiky hair and rough hands, shared food and stolen warmth. *Zabuza* . "-or my unit we aimed to kill, because nobody was going to come at us any other way. We all knew the other nations hated Kiri-nin, and if we went easy on each other, it was just setting us up for death, so we didn't."

Kakashi doesn't say anything, so she just continues plucking plants from the ground, shredding them with her nails before dropping them and starting again. He killed her buzz, which is hella rude.

"You miss them," he says, and she tries and fails not to flinch. This conversation is going to be a huge bummer. She can feel it. Socially inept bastard, he jammed his nose right into her fucking open wound.

"Duh. I love them, of course I miss them," she says coolly, like it means nothing, when in reality it's just the opposite. "Kiri doesn't have teams like Konoha, so we chose each other. We lived in the same barracks, I cooked their food and they braided my hair. We fought in a war and slept inside the same bed. It would be weird if I didn't miss them," she says.

Hatake, being the guy he is, asks the important question. "I'm sorry, did you just say you slept in the same bed? All of you?"

She lets out a huff, actually relieved he asked that instead of something more meaningful. "Yah, for years. Right up until the point I woke up to Zabuza grinding his morning wood into my back. Hell,

even after that we still shared a bed sometimes," she admits freely and without shame.

Hatake chokes on the spit in his own mouth, and she laughs at him. She supposes that it's kind of shocking to hear stories of the legendary Demon of the Mist's pubescent boners. Good, maybe if he sees Zabuza as human he'll never murder him. Not even in defence. It's not very likely, but a girl can hope. Boners stopping murders...
ha...

"Is that why-?" he asks vaguely.

She makes a face and gestures with her hand. "Is that why what? Gonna have to be a little more clear."

"You know."

"Obviously I don't. Spit it out. You're a grown ass man," she taunts.

"Is that why you are so immodest?" he asks finally. She laughs again.

"Hatake, my immodesty is one hundred percent me. I have literally killed people. What is showing boob going to do?" she offers gleefully, hoping to see a spectacular response.

"I see," he says, deadpan. She sighs and rolls her eyes. This guy is no fun. Ryuishi goes back to picking grass, thinking about units and teammates. Her eyes dart to his slanted hitai-ate. She thinks of how they died. How he watched boulders crushing his best friend, how he felt his lightning-covered hand punching through the hollow chest cavity of the girl who cared for him. She stares at the covered eye, thinking how horrible it must have been. She imagines Kisame dying beneath tons of stone, giving goodbyes through bloodstained lips. She envisions Zabuza, beautiful and cruel, whispering her name as his heart stops.

"I'm sorry," she blurts out, and he pauses again. If this keeps up he is never going to finish these stupid stances. He looks at her, the question in his eye.

"Er... Well, it's just... My unit is still around doing stupid shit. Yours isn't," she says awkwardly, trying to reach for the empathy she doesn't have. She reaches for it desperately. Is this normal? Friends have conversations like this, right? Oh shit, she fucked up. She fucked up bad. Holy hell-

She glances toward his covered eye, and he sucks in a breath. She is so glad her unit is made of selfish assholes.

Hatake looks at her, thinking that they didn't even have to spar for her to land a blow. He feels like his privacy means nothing, like she has ruined something sacred, and for a moment anger rushes through him. How could she know-? What was he saying, she was the master of an inconceivably large spy network, of course she would know. He would have to inform the Hokage of the leak later on.

He says nothing, only staring at her. She shifts uncomfortably under the weight of his gaze. The moment carries on, and she darts her eyes up to meet his. He watches as she scrambles to her feet, pulling up the bottom of her dress. For a second he thinks she is trying to expose herself again, and in a way she does, but her hand points to a long scar running up her ribs, ending around her heart. It is the remnant of an attempted killing blow. He had noticed it before during her containment.

"Kisame gave this to me the night I left," she says, her fingertips tracing it tenderly. He doesn't understand. He doesn't want to look at her like this, but before he can beg for her to put her dress back down like a civilized person, she moves.

She turns around and touches the thick line that crosses her hip and dips underneath the waistline of her panties to appear on the top of her thigh. He doesn't know what to think about the black cotton

garment or the disfigurement. His mind has been carefully blanked since she pulled her dress up. No thought runs through it, and he treats the ongoing incident like a practice in concentration. Don't look at them, he thinks, look at her face, not her rear. Imagine she isn't doing this, and never lifted up her dress.

"Zabuza left me with this one on the day of graduation," she explains further, her dark eyes soft. The strike was meant to cut the spine and kill. She spins around again, the material of her dress slipping out of her hands and finally slinking down to her ankles. Relief fills him, along with embarrassment and curiosity. What was the point of this morbid peep show?

"You got an eye. That's how we remember them, by the things they leave," she finishes, and Kakashi feels his anger and embarrassment turn to pity. Obito gave him his eye and made him better. Rin put it in and healed his wounds. Her teammates tried to kill her and carved her flesh so badly it would never heal back. The comparison is nonexistent, but she stands there like she really understands how a team should work.

His eyes dart to her hands and the faint lightning scars he knows she covered this morning. He understands that by giving them to her he has joined their ranks, and he feels wary and mildly disgusted.

"Did you leave them with scars as well?" he asks and she shakes her head no.

"Not like they gave me," she says. Zabuza might have one near his kidney from her and Kisame might have mental trauma, but she didn't leave those for them to remember her by. She gave them a way to come back. Only, the dicks hadn't used it yet.

Whatever. They were assholes.

Don't let this ruin the day, she thinks, don't linger on it. Ryuishi flops back down into the grass and turns her eyes back to the young man. He's different than he was portrayed in the series. Not quite who he

will become yet. He's still withdrawn and maybe a bit sullen, and far too serious for his own good, but the potential for the quirky and capable leader is there though, she can see it shining through. Ah, youth. She remembers it well.

Or something like that. Her seventeenth birthday is only a few months away, but in reality she's older than that. Like, if she had aged regularly, she'd be pretty old by now. Maybe she should start doing old people stuff with Orochimaru? She bets he plays shogi or go or some shit. He totally seems like the type to do it. Then again, she's never seen a grandpa do quite as many backflips as she has seen Orochimaru do.

She smiles at the thought, feeling the warm sunshine dance across her face. It feels nice here, under the speckled lighting of the tall trees. Hearing the breeze rustle through the leaves is calming and peaceful.

The the slapping sound of feet on wood catches her attention. In the distance she can hear something approaching at high speed. Like, ridiculously high speed. There's no time to do anything at all, and her only thought is that Kakashi is a total tool for bringing her here. It's not her who's going to get into trouble. She'll be long gone before that can happen.

"My Rival!" somebody bellows, and she takes the time to appreciate him doing that. By screaming like a huge dork, he has efficiently cut through any flashback she could have been having. No enemy announces themselves like that on a battlefield. It's also hella fucking weird to hear English for the first time in forever, even as mangled and accent-thickened as it is.

A green blur cuts out from fucking nowhere, going so fast she has a fair bit of hassle trying to track him. An axe kick sweeps from nowhere to land on Kakashi's defensively raised arms, and the force of the blow sends out shock waves that send her hair flying. Even her heavy braid shakes.

Ryuishi appreciates the move in the same way an artist appreciates another artist's work. His form is perfect, and his power is incredible. Something in her blood sings for a second, hungry and wanting. She wants to pit herself against him, struggle and fight against another taijutsu master. No weapons, just fists and feet, elbows and knees. Will her dexterity win against his speed? Would she be able to choke the life from his lungs before he can smash her into a pulp?

She smothers the monster down, pulling it back with promises of '*later, maybe one day, not now*'. She's supposed to be a civilian, not to mention on vacation or a therapeutic getaway or some shit.

Then she registers his face and is left with a burning ember of envy in her heart. The man has the highest, most beautiful cheekbones she has seen on anybody. His hair is thick and amazingly shiny, so lustrous and full it's insane. His teeth are shiny and straight.

Might Guy stands in front of her, trading attacks with Hatake, and she has never felt so dull. Life oozes out of him, she can taste it in the air. All the parts may not match, and he might not be attractive or aesthetically pleasing, but sweet heaven above is he *alive* .

It looks both invigorating and exhausting.

"Kakashi!" the man exclaims, only the way he says it is way more intense. It ends up being 'Ka-ka-shi!' instead of one fluid word. "You have been remiss in your training! Three days have passed, and you have not shown! How do you expect to reach greatness when you lack discipline?" he cries out, and Ryuishi hides a chortle behind her hand.

Hatake flips the man backwards and steps back, bracing himself. He flicks his eyes over to her, and she smiles like the cat who ate the canary.

Kakashi wonders what he did in his life to deserve this sort of punishment. Trapped between a mystery of a man and an enigma of a woman, he tries to figure out if there is some sort of scent he puts

out that attracts nutcases. He hopes his dogs would have told him by now if he did.

"As your rival, I will ensure you do not fall behind! Come, spar with me!" he announces, hurling himself like a tornado towards the dog-nin. He wanted to train today, true, but he didn't want to be a mess of exhaustion. It seems that fate hates him. Go figure.

Ryuishi sits in the shade of the tall trees, watching them bounce around, a flurry of movement and energy. By some unspoken rule, no weapons are being used, and the jutsu that Hatake hurls around never exceed C-rank. It seems strange, light and non-threatening in nature, totally different than what she knows. For a second she wants to scoff and call them weak for not pushing harder, but she catches herself before she can cast judgement. Kiri and Orochimaru may have made her strong in their ruthless conditioning, but they also made her incapable of using anything but deadly force against a person. Sure, she can incapacitate, but she can't remember the last time she fought without a body count. She doesn't imagine such behavior would be conducive to a style that enforces trust and teamwork.

She smiles softly, catching the new arrival's curious gaze on her for a second before he concentrates on the spar. She reads him like a book, can almost taste his faint interest as to why she is here. Even more than that, she can feel the trust he has in Hatake, the faith that the silver haired man knows what he is doing with her. That sort of trust, knowing and secure, she hungers for it. The envy grows in her chest.

It seems to go forever, the exercise, and she wishes that she didn't have to play the useless civilian very briefly. Watching them work their bodies makes her blood boil, and she feels that monster named bloodlust sing through her body. Like a lullaby it whispers to her, reminding her how good it would feel to cut loose, how much emptier she feels after a fight. It hisses in her ear, and she shudders. She feels violence beat in her heart and poison she wants to spit, sitting heavy on her tongue.

The more she focuses on it, the more she has to work through it. She's hedonistic by nature, doing what feels good to her simply for the pleasure of the sensation. That being said, as reckless as she can be, she has impulse control down to an art by now. It takes a certain patience to plot and plan like she does, and fighting them would definitely work against her in the long run. If she starts leaking killing intent, or worse, Void-infected killing intent, her ruse is done for. No matter what, Hatake would flip shit.

There's a trick to working around her impulses, though. She has learned it over many years of failing mental health and training. She knows herself well enough to know what works short-term, at least.

I wonder if he chafes really bad in that jump suit? she thinks, looking at Guy. *It must be hell for the boys.*

Why does Kakashi wrap bandages directly below his butt? Is there a story behind it? HA, behind. I am awesome. His hair is ridiculous too. Hey, what if I put some smoothing serum in it? Nah, he's a stick in the mud; I bet he'd throw a fit. Man, he needs to relax. When's the last time he masturbated? When's the last time I masturbated? Oh God, why did I think about that? I mean, no, never mind, that was just a random thought.

Hmm, Kusa needs more humanitarian efforts to consolidate loyalty, maybe I can help kill some bandits and make sure it's publicly seen? Bring some trade in from Iron? The samurai seem to like the business, at least. I wonder if sword skill is an indication of baseball skill? God, baseball is so fucking boring. I wonder how much it would hurt if I dragged my nails through my own skin? Probably a lot. I shouldn't do that. Whichever part of me thought that is a masochist. Wait, is that a kink I have? Why is my head in the gutter? Oh, wait, hormones .

The monologue is ridiculous and fluid, a constant stream of consciousness running through her head at all times. By bringing it up to the surface of her mind, she can distract herself forever. Most

of it doesn't make sense, but half the fun of it is trying to figure out what gave birth to some of the thoughts.

Eventually after some hours the two break apart, and Ryuishi is dozing lightly against a tree, simultaneously trying to figure out which traders to recommend to go to Kusa and if Kakashi can tell when she farts. She's banking on a certain Suna trading caravan and the fact that he probably can, when the man in question walks over, accompanied by the man with incredible cheekbones.

"I'm finished," he says blandly, and she opens her eyes to look up at him, taking in the sweat dripping off of him, and the lingering filth all over his person.

"Ugh," she complains with a grimace. "You're disgusting."

He shrugs and goes to fling some of the aforementioned grime. It conveniently heads in her direction, and she scrambles for a moment to get the hell out of the way, bristling like a cat. Her lunge for safety places her in front of the newcomer.

"Hello!" he says, and she thinks his voice is about a hundred times' more expressive than a usual person's. "Forgive me! I was so caught up in our Youthful Spar I neglected to introduce myself. I am known as Konoha's Sublime Green Beast of Prey, Might Guy!"

He slides into just about the lamest fucking pose she has ever seen and shoots her a thumbs up. Even covered in dirt and sweat, he still manages to have his smile so bright that it fucking flashes. Envy burns through her yet again. His teeth are perfect and straight, unlike her own snaggle-toothed grin.

"It is a pleasure to meet you, Might-san," she says, gritting through it and bowing at the waist like a proper lady would. "I'm afraid I don't have quite as grand of a title, but you may call me Yuri."

Hatake shoots her a judgmental glance for the incredible lie, but she simply smiles like a clueless civilian. Hatake can go suck a dick.

Guy laughs suddenly out of nowhere, and she tries to keep smiling, even though he's making her feel incredibly weird.

"A fine name!" he cries. "Is it not, my rival?" he asks, and Hatake gives her the most evaluating gaze she has seen on him.

"Yep." he answers, and Guy twists around in his spot. She has never met somebody who embodies the word 'dork' as much as this man before. It's insane what a spaz he is.

"Anyway," she says, sliding her eyes to Hatake, "I got all the the stuff for lunch in the fridge. There's enough for one more person."

The dog-nin looks at her like she must be joking, insinuating that he invite someone over to his own apartment on her orders, but he isn't given a choice, because the jumpsuit clad spaz has heard her already.

It's in the moment Guy is clasping her hands and thanking her with tears in his eyes that she smiles viciously at Hatake. Wake her up at six in the morning, and see what happens?

Sarutobi Hiruzen observes the scene inside the orb in front of him with calculating and pity-filled eyes. The aged man watches as one of his most capable jonin takes a bite of his food and grabs her around the waist and spins her around his rival's apartment, tears streaming down his face. He catches the tenseness on her brow, reads the awkwardness of her limbs, and the wariness in her empty eyes.

Touch starved, he thinks. Hungry for positive attention.

As a ruler, it gives him more openings. He knows how to play the child better, how to twist her to his desires. Every interaction he has read in his reports and every scene he has observed brings him better understanding of the target of his manipulations. She can improvise and adapt, capable of utilizing very few resources to

devastating effect. Tools from a beauty shop make her blend seamlessly with the crowds, and she can twist small, awkward exchanges into actual conversations. She can work a person, read the wants and desires in their body language and words, and become whatever they want her to be. She is a shapechanger, a skin walker, but she is lost and alone.

As Hokage, he can use this to better his village. He can feed her tiny amounts of the affection she craves and leave her hungry for more. He can use his shinobi to whisper in her ear, to have his voice heard and understood. As Hokage, he can take it away and control as he sees fit.

As a father and teacher, he is filled with pity. Such a young thing, and she is already so worn, so very tired and afraid. He watches her cringe away from contact she has not initiated, as if expecting pain and assault. He notices the way her face folds into a meaningless, practiced smile that covers surprise every time a common decency is directed towards her. Her life has been hardship and trial, abuse without mercy. He mourns that such a bright child was not born inside the walls of his home. They would have listened, would have nurtured her in the correct ways and let her bloom into a wonderful creation whose fruit could have fed the village.

He looks at the files handed to him days ago by a clone of his trusted operative. Pages and pages of information that would save lives and halt future destruction. Such wonderful fruits produced from such a neglected tree. He thinks again: what could she have made if given the proper care?

The older man forgets that one tree had ended a snarling, thorn-filled vine. He forgets that a serpentine child was born in the Land of Fire, and the flames had left him cold and wanting. He idealizes things in his head, and forgets that the Will of Fire cannot exist without fuel to consume, and that the smoke they produce can be cloying and toxic.

The Third Hokage takes a long drag from his pipe and thinks that being a leader is harder than most would believe. He wishes that he

could give the child the things she needs, but he knows that what is best for the village is to give her just enough to give him control.

AN: Everybody is beginning to play a very confusing game. Ah! Networking and Ninja machinations. Also, the way Ryuishi gets through her urges? Nonsense, that's how! We also get to see the story behind some of her marks, and the weirdly loving way she thinks about them. This is not healthy behavior. If someone tries to kill you, do not continue to associate with them. That being said! Guy! I took his name from the way it's spelled on his wiki page, so... And we get shameless Ryuishi! What's a little skin after you've brutally torn out someones eyes, huh?

I want to thank my lurkers, favoriters, and followers. I also want to thank my reviewers, because you are the air I breath.

I also want to thank my beta Enbi. Bless them.

Question:What's the most ridiculous/embarrassing situation Ryuishi gets into, and how does it end? OR Gasp! Ryuishi is sick of wearing clothes! She decides to live out her dreams and somehow, kick ass in fantasy girl armor. How do others react?

Meeting the Team

I do not Own Naruto.

On the twelfth day of this misadventure, Hatake Kakashi wakes up from his light sleep to the oppressive feeling of chakra flooding his apartment. His eyes snap open like a firework bursting into life, and he is suddenly so very, very aware. Sleep drains from his system like a distant memory, and every instinct he has tells him he is under threat, that he has been discovered on a mission and that he is about to be attacked. His muscles tense and flex while his hand grips the kunai beneath his pillow. He stills, and for several long minutes, he waits for the assault.

It does not come.

Cautiously, he takes in his surroundings, checking the traps around his bed with his Sharingan eye, searching his room for intruders that would be otherwise hidden. Every lever and hinge is untriggered, every wire and blade still in place. Other than himself, there is nothing living in his room; there is only furniture and flooring. No light streams through his window. The glassy plane remains black and empty, save for the distant stars hanging above the world. Not even the moon is out tonight.

His clock glares red, informing him that it is 3:58 in the morning.

Still, the miasma lingers inside his home, so thick it could be a tangible mist. It isn't the worst he has ever experienced, or the most dominant, but it is there, in his home, where he should be safe. He breathes in slowly, trying to figure the enigma out before he remembers the unwanted guest in his home, the treacherous kunoichi sharing his roof. He grits his teeth and slides the blankets down and his mask up. Only that idiot had such a stain on her

energy, and only she would think this hour would be an ideal time to do... whatever it is she is doing.

He gets up silently, determined to catch her in whatever ridiculous act it is this time. He expertly maneuvers through the wires and weight boards decorating his room, making sure his footsteps are silent and undetectable. The dark means little to a shinobi of his caliber, and he moves through it like a shadow. Everything in his apartment is unnaturally still, and that foul chakra clouds his senses. He's all for casting judgement on the criminal until he opens the door to the hallway.

The sharp, sour stink of fear hits his nose so fast he almost sneezes. The reek of adrenaline and horror swamps over the smell of seawater, flowers, and blood. His own scent is hidden completely in the deluge. His pace increases, and he reaches the den area where he knows she sleeps. The sight that greets him is nothing if not eerie.

Ryuishi is sitting up with her back bowed, head thrown back, mouth open, staring blankly at the empty ceiling. The blankets are crumpled around her waist, her long, tangled hair pooling behind her. Her fingers are clenched tight in the covers, and he can hear her breath, sharp and quick.

Frozen like a statue in the darkness, she looks like she's screaming without a sound.

His hand clenches on the kunai.

A night terror. She's stuck inside some sort of open-eyed night terror. He has never seen it like this, but he doesn't know what else it could be. If she was aware, she might have noticed him approaching, or heard the creak of the leather-handled knife. She might have done a number of things, but she just sits there, her long, scarred neck bared, breathing like she is panicking.

"Watanabe," he whispers, keeping his distance, "wake up."

It does something, because her fingers twitch in the fabric, but it isn't much. She can hear him at least, and that's a good thing.

"You're in my apartment. It's July twenty-second," he breathes out. "Wake up."

Another twitch, and though he thought it was impossible, her breathing speeds up even more, rapidly deteriorating to an uneven rhythm. He can see the line of her throat and the rabbit-quick pulse just underneath her skin. Her terror permeates the air so thickly he can taste it on the back of his tongue.

"You're safe. You're in Konoha, and yesterday-" he tries, but as soon as he says the name of his village, she bolts up with a choked hiss, spinning off the couch to land in a crouch on the floor. She scrambles for purchase, wild and caught in whatever flashback has cropped up. He knows the reaction, can see the familiar lack of comprehension in her eyes as she darts for the nearest exit.

Kakashi dives for her.

In any other situation he knows this is the wrong thing to do, but she is a missing-nin not in her right mind. Right now she could deal damage in an insane way, not only to others, but to herself. He has seen men twice his age break their limbs trying to get out of genjutsu long gone and watched women tear at their skin trying to peel away things that aren't there. Worse still, he has watched many instinctively use jutsu to destroy enemies that do not exist. In Konoha, they are sent to a Yamanaka and treated before that, but in the war there wasn't time. He has watched many be talked out of it, and has observed many more succumb to ties and holds until they snap out of it.

The only thought he has is that he has to restrain her before she can get loose and wreak havoc. Who knows what a missing-nin could do?

She's spindly and flexible, but he manages to catch her ankle as he lands on his side. A chakra-powered foot crashes through the leg of his coffee table by his head in thanks. He catches that too and tugs back, causing her hips to crash against the floor. She rears up, and in a frankly disturbing display of flexibility, she twists like a snake to face him, arms raised and darting out towards his head. He dodges the first, but the second catches his neck, leaving a long scratch.

"I'm not for sale," she spits, and her husky voice sounds utterly ruined. "Let me go!"

He moves like lightning, pushing himself up and yanking her legs down so she slides across the floor beneath him. There is a keening sound, and he plants his weight down on her back, pinning her down. Immediately she twists back around, her hands darting forward and digging into the floor as if to drag herself away. He leans forward to grab her wrists, which turns out to be a mistake when she rears back, slamming the top of her skull into his jaw. His teeth clack together and he lets out a grunt, quite sure he just bit his cheek. It is confirmed when he tastes blood.

His outstretched arm turns as he gives up chasing her wrists, instead making sure to wrap it around her neck. She ducks her chin just in time to avoid being put to sleep, but her flailing hands suddenly have purpose and scramble for purchase on his skin. He hears the snap of teeth and tucks his arm against her tighter, his free hand going to cover her mouth. She inhales, and he knows what's going to happen before it does. She screams against his palm, and even muffled it is a terrible sound.

"It's July twenty-second-" he starts, his voice calm and steady, but her hands tear away from his arms, going to form seals. He curses under his breath, his hand moving away from her mouth to break them apart. She takes the time to talk.

"You're fucking dead," she chokes out harshly, "I ripped out your throat, I tore out your eyes, I watched you drown, you're *dead*."

"It's July twenty-second, in my apartment," he says as she flails beneath him. His hands feel her trying to twist and buck his weight off, and he's almost certain that if she was coherent she would be able to. It's a good thing she isn't. He grabs a hand and twists it behind her back, struggling as she wrestles against him. Eventually, due to the angle, he traps it between them, pinned between his chest and her back. Amazingly, it doesn't seem to hurt her, though he supposes if he regularly contorted in absurd ways he would be the same.

In a feat of sheer incredible flexibility and stubborn strength, she manages to unbalance him enough so she can slide her legs right out beneath him, her lower body flowing like a snake's to come free. He doesn't think the human spine or pelvis is supposed to do that. She plants her feet in the most awkward squat Kakashi has ever seen and shoves back against him, forcing his back against the floor. He barely has time to cover her mouth again before she is screaming.

"You are safe," he lies. "Last night you and I played something called Kiss, Marry, Kill. You told me you would have kissed the the Second Hokage-" he says, and she struggles without reason or technique. Her legs kick out and he can almost hear his floor creaking against the raw physical power. No chakra, just muscle. "-and killed Madara Uchiha. You said you would want to marry Uzumaki Mito in a fall wedding by the sea. You made something called Eggplant Parmesan, even though you said there wasn't the right cheese. Then you threw up because apparently you cannot eat dairy. I thought it was very good-" She shudders against him, and he can hear the scream taper off into something like a sob against his hand. Her nails scrape on his skin and the wooden floor.

"-you told me we should go to the park, because you like to swing, and I said it would be strange because we're adults. You told me we should go at night but-" he continues, his voice soft and controlled. Her kicking and writhing begins to slow a bit.

"You sang something in the shower. I don't know what it was or why you take so many showers. It was very soothing. It is July twenty-second-" She stops kicking completely, and he can feel her slowly begin to unwind, going limp against him. Her long hair is sprawled out everywhere and her panicked, panting breathing evens out as she lets her head drop against his collarbone. Her grip begins to give, and he sees her eyelashes flutter.

"You're in my apartment, you are safe," he tells her again, and he can feel the tremors as she shakes in the darkness. He can feel her trembling. He realizes that of all the things he has noticed about her over these past few days, he never really noticed how short she is in comparison to him. There is time for growth, and he is sure she will, but right now she is smaller than him.

Sixteen, he thinks. *She's a sixteen year old girl* .

It has never been more apparent to him than in this moment. She is so human as she lets the tightness go out of her body and sinks back against him, an antithesis to her most powerful persona. He can feel the beat of her pulse against his arm, can see the rise and fall of her chest as she catches her breath. The shifting mess of her sleep shirt as she settles and ridiculously short shorts spells it out for him plain and clear.

She is awkward and rude and loud. She is dangerous and a criminal, but she is human, weak in ways he has close experience with.

"Are you back?" he asks, and she lifts her chin in answer, giving him unrestricted access to her throat. A sign of trust. In turn, he takes his hand away from her mouth. She inhales through it.

"Kakashi?" she whispers, and she sounds uncertain, weak and lost. Not the woman he has come to see in the past few days, but something else, something desperate and sad. He feels awkward and unsure.

"Mmm-hmm," he responds quietly.

"I'm sorry," she says, and the idea of her apologizing after this makes him question what has been influencing her life. Whatever it is, whoever it is, they have been terrible for her. He slowly unwinds his arm from around her neck.

"Don't leave," she orders him, and he really doesn't know how to respond to it, but she keeps shaking and trembling even as she turns around and buries her face in his chest, hand clutching at the fabric of his shirt.

"Please, don't leave," she says again, and he hums in the back of his throat in the darkness, stroking the top of her head as if she was one of his canine summons because it's the only thing he can think to do. Outside, the world continues to turn, and the stars still shine as bright as ever.

Kakashi wakes up late, and even then it is not because his alarm went off. He wakes up because he can feel a familiar chakra flaring in the distance as a warning of incoming.

He shifts to move and signal back, but a cool weight on his side stops him. He nearly panics, because this could quite possibly be the worst scenario he could have imagined for the visitors to walk in on. In fact, the only reason he doesn't panic is because his life seems to continually throw him in the strangest and most incriminating positions and he has learned to deal with it, current arrangement with Watanabe notwithstanding.

He shifts slightly, wondering when the blankets and pillows migrated from the couch to the floor, and tries to look like he knows exactly what he is doing. When his masked coworkers land silently outside his window, glued to the walls like bugs, he swears he can see them blanch in surprise.

They need more training, he thinks. He adds it to his growing list of things to catch up on.

He raises his hand silently to his mask-covered lips, signaling for quiet, and motions for them to come inside. He knows if he doesn't everything will seem even more suspicious than it already does.

Not that it can get more suspicious. Having a young woman who also happens to be a known missing-nin draped across him, legs tangling together, half covered by a sleeping roll is inherently a suspicious thing. It is also a mortifying thing, because he can feel her soft breath puff out across his neck and he is fairly certain that if her long hair looks tangled and messed, his own is not much better. If he thought wishing her tiny, skintight shorts into pants would work, he would do so, but at this point he has lost all faith in a merciful higher power.

You're in control, he thinks, this is all part of the mission they don't know about. Do not, under any circumstances, act as though you are, arguably, cuddling with a criminal.

The two ANBU operatives glide in like ghosts, not a sound being made. At least their stealth is up to par. The robed figure with the cat mask is staring at him, though. He can feel it. He knows who she is.

Indeed, Tenzo is staring at the scene before him. He has to remind himself again and again that he trusts his senpai, and that he knows the man would never do anything to harm Konohagakure. It is still a test of his will to not boot the missing-nin away from him though. It would be standard procedure to remove her from his fellow operative and detain her. It would be simple, even.

A memory burns to life inside his head, one full of naked breasts and ruthless kicks, of bared skin shimmering in the sun, soaked with droplets of water sliding down every dip and curve-

He smothers it, then stomps on the ashes, then scatters them to the wind. That never happened. *Never.*

Okay, maybe it wouldn't be so simple, but he is certain he could do it. The only thing stopping him is the fact that his commanding officer is

awake and aware. He smells no poison, sees no weapons, notices no glaringly out of place details.

... Save for the criminal clad in nothing but a sleeveless top and shamefully small shorts nestling against his commander, of course. The way his arm is wrapped around her shoulders seems to suggest that it is a mutual thing, though. And he knows, somehow, the image of the two of them tousled and tangled together will have to be one of the memories he burns from his mind. After this is done, it will have to have never happened.

Tenzo glances at the newest addition to the squad. He takes in the short stature and remembers his young age. He will have to show the boy how it is done. Being able to wipe the slate clean has always been a useful tool to him.

Report, his commander signs, and Tenzo hesitates to do so. How do you say, *was suspicious that a nefarious old man I used to work for was up to tricks again*, without giving anything away about Root?

The answer is you don't, you simply say, *Requisitioning status of squad leader due to failure to appear*.

He can see the almost bored expression on his senpai's face, and the look he directs to the girl in his arms. *On active duty*, he signs with one hand, and Tenzo feels about thirty-six percent better about the situation. Of course, this was a conversion method and not a huge mistake on the part of his senpai. A mission! That's why she was here, a mission! He goes to sign his affirmation, but the wood next to his commander creaks and there is a soft, sleepy groan. All operatives freeze. The blankets shift around as she moves, limbs stretching out. The room is full of the sound of popping joints, as she twists and turns against her bunkmate.

Inside his head, Kakashi screams wordlessly. Now? Now she's waking up and rubbing herself against him? NOW?

His hand flips out and he signals out the ' *hide* ' sign to his team. They have seconds to disappear before she wakes up. The following scramble nearly makes him laugh with hysteria.

The missing-nin lets out a sleepy hum from deep in her throat. Long black lashes sweep upward and reveal coal-colored eyes groggily staring out at him, and a pouty set of lips.

"Hatake?" she asks, confused but not alarmed. He sees her blink and take in the position. He sees her ponder and try to recollect for a second, and the for the first time in his life he sees her flush like a schoolgirl with shame.

"Oh," she croaks, her hand going to hide her face. "I am so sorry you had to see that. Not cool of me at all. Uh..." she tries to say, even though he knows she isn't really awake.

He looks at her, urging her to go on with his eye, but her brows squeeze together on her head and her frown deepens along with her coloring. She really is ashamed, ashamed and confused. Also sleepy. Even after just waking up, she can be so many things at once. Truly, she is an enigma.

Ryuishi tries to think past the heavy fog in her head, wanting nothing more than a shower and a cup of coffee. She wouldn't even care if it was a hot cup. She just wants it. She also wants to know why her spidey senses went off and woke her up, because Watanabe Ryuishi does not just wake up at-she glances over to the clock and squints hard-at fucking six thirty-six. It doesn't happen, unless something's about to go down. She has developed a keen awareness in all her years travelling alone and being hunted, and right now it's telling her they are not alone.

On guard, but also groggy and trying to act calm and not at all embarrassed about last night, she scans the apartment. She also takes the time to appreciate how warm and comfortable she is, sponging the heat of another human being. She's almost tempted to go back to sleep and embrace whatever consequences there are,

but she also knows it would probably be classified as reckless behavior.

She yawns and luxuriates for a few moments more, but the urgent need to take a leak and also figure out what the fuck is going on drives her to remove herself from Hatake's person. She can almost see the man slump with relief when she does. Her scan doesn't reveal much, but she didn't expect it to.

"I'ma take a shower," she informs Hatake, lethargically standing. "And then I'm gonna make breakfast for everybody in this apartment," she says, and yes, the way he purposefully does not react gives him away. Playing it cool isn't what he would do if she said something weird. He knows there are others inside.

Still though, she's glad. She doesn't know if she can meet his eyes after last night. Of all the fucking things that he had to see from her, a night terror of the Void turned into a mishmash of flashbacks wasn't what she wanted to show.

"If there is only you at the table," she whispers quietly, making sure only he can hear, "I will assume that my trust in you has been misplaced and react accordingly."

She moves away and hopes that whoever they are, they enjoy forty-five minutes of awkwardly waiting for her to finish. Assholes.

She emerges later, makeup on point and outfit ready to turn no heads at all. She looks fairly domestic, but only an idiot would assume she is as collected as she looks.

When she leaves the hallway, Kakashi is indeed waiting for her, somehow dressed and ready. Sitting beside him are two ANBU operatives, mask and cloaks on. It almost makes her laugh, how uncomfortable everybody looks, and how absolutely out of place they all are. She doesn't though, because she has no idea what they are here for.

She scans over them and sighs, noting the place of her bag and recalling all exit points in case this turns sour. Something in her gut churns, and she dejectedly accepts that she was stupid to try and make friends with a village-allied shinobi. She was absolutely fucking nuts to hope that it would work.

Frustrated but accepting, she turns to make breakfast. If they want to detain her, or assassinate her, she wants it to be done on a full stomach. Bitterness is thick on her tongue, and her graceful movements are laced with anger.

Stupid, she thinks as she sets the rice on. The looming threat of betrayal weighs on her back as she works on poaching the eggs and the self-loathing settles on her shoulders like a familiar shroud as she broils the fish. Nobody speaks as she sets the table and pours the tea, and she hates the calm, placid smile she has on her face while she works. She wants to bolt and go destroy something like she planned on doing before this gamble, but she knows any sudden movements would end poorly for her.

She sits down, and Hatake helps himself like nothing weird is happening. She hopes her act is half as good as his.

"Please, eat?" she asks, knowing that the two cloaked figures probably won't. She finally takes the time to look at their porcelain masks and wants to scream. The cat is familiar, and she knows it's the same partner that was with Hatake when they first fought. Tenzo, or Yamato, or whatever the fuck his name is. There's no way in hell she can skip out when she's up against these fuckers together, not when Hatake has hardwood flooring.

Even more exasperated, she turns to look at the other operative. The height difference is enough to make her pause. Even though it is possibly the worst time imaginable, her cuteness-loving heart beats heavy in her chest.

Ryuishi lets out what could be the most ridiculous-sounding coo from somewhere in her chest. It's super wrong to have a child assassin,

she knows this, but she cannot help it, considering that whoever it is looks like they are playing baby's first murder mission. The mask is smaller than usual, and the cloak is tailored to size as well. Her eyes are glued to the youngest figure in the room, her moe-heart beating hard.

Hatake pauses mid-chew to stare at her.

"Sorry," she forces out like a wheeze, "I know this is super serious and I am really scared, but the tiny one," she bites her lip and tries to smother the 'hnng' sound. It doesn't help. The aforementioned tiny one doesn't react, but now the two older ones are watching. She fiddles with her chopsticks.

"Why... why do you think they are here?" Hatake asks slowly.

"To, um, arrest me. Or maybe get rid of me because of reasons. Um, maybe because my proposal has been rejected, or they just don't-hang on, I'm sorry. Young child?" she halts mid sentence, "Can you not face me for a second? I think I'm getting heart palpitations and it's really hard to focus."

The ANBU in question turns to look at Hatake for guidance and he gets a bewildered nod. The operative turns around and she can finally breathe again.

"This is my team. They are here because I missed a training date and they were concerned," he tells her.

Suddenly, Ryuishi feels entirely ridiculous and also super relieved. Oh, oh man. Tenzo probably is suspicious right now, but nobody knows she's the Rakki Ryuu. She's still just the Kiri no Ningyo here, one that's probably under Hatake's supposed command or something as equally sneaky and stupid. Oh man. Oh shit. Sweet blessed baby Jesus in the manger.

"So I'm not in trouble for last night?" she asks quietly, just to be sure.

"Those kind of things happen to almost everyone with trauma." he tells her. She wants to deny anything ever traumatic happened to her, and she still wants to run, but her heart eases up just a bit.

"Okay," she breathes, "That's cool. I'm cool, you're cool. Everything's cool."

It's really not though, because that's two more fucking people involved in this than she wanted. Even if they don't know she's the Rakki Ryuu, their actions stink to her. In fact, this whole situation stinks to the high fucking heavens. There's no way in hell the Hokage doesn't know she's here, and there is no fucking way two ANBU don't attack on sight. There's a plot afoot, and she is almost certain it has to do with neutralizing her or ingratiating her to Konoha. She'd be fine with them trying, if it didn't have a good chance of blowing up in a ton of people's faces.

It should be said that most people wouldn't be able to recognize the Kiri no Ningyo on sight. That's a given, or she wouldn't be able to sneak around so much. Somebody who has encountered her as a criminal, though? Tenzo should have her head on a spike. The new kid might be excused. Maybe. She's improvising a lot here, and while she is great at winging it, she also knows it's best to be a little suspicious of just about everyone.

"They should eat," she says suddenly, with no social grace at all. "Because if they aren't here to murder me, then they are guests and I made all this fucking food and tea."

Bemused, Kakashi gives them a sign, and they fill their plates grudgingly. Well, the kid has to turn around first, and it might explode her heart a little bit, but they do begin setting up at least.

Chopsticks disappear under masks while she pointedly looks around the room, avoiding peeking. She honestly couldn't care if they had a penis for a nose. It wouldn't matter to her in the least. What matters is that she no longer feels safe or trusting enough to continue this ruse much longer. She's hightailing it as soon as she can and

spending the rest of the time training her ass off like Orochimaru wants. More resistance, more dislocating limbs for increased flexibility, more endurance and weight training. He wants her to sharpen her chakra control even more so she can crank out A and B-rank jutsu even with her limited pool instead of only one or two. Even worse, he wants her to practice her genjutsu. She hates doing that. She knows for a fact that her genjutsu is a ticket straight to the Void along with whatever vision she wants to show them.

A hum of appreciation takes her attention away from thoughts of more bloody fucking work and drags it to the feline masked man, who is now holding his plate and inhaling food in the most polite way ever. In perfect right angles he picks up another bite of egg in his chopsticks, lifts it up, and crams it under his bone white mask. Then again, and again. He takes bites in rapid, perfectly postured succession. She's never seen someone stuff their face with manners before and it leaves her a little stunned. She looks over and the boy is behaving more dignified, but also very responsive to her meal.

"Hatake," she starts, sliding her eyes over to the man, "Do you never feed your team?"

He blinks his eye and swallows. "We eat rations regularly. Their diet is very balanced," he tells her. She sends him a withering glare.

"They aren't fucking dogs. What about actual food?"

He shrugs and picks up a piece of the broiled saury. She makes a disgusted face. This changes things. Maybe she doesn't exactly trust them, but she came from Kiri dammit, and she *maybe* might have a quirk about bad food. Nobody deserves to live off of bland, dry rations. Food is to be celebrated and loved. Flavor is a thing to be cherished. She will not let this transgression stand.

"That's it. You do whatever you want, but I'm stockpile cooking today. There will be enough frozen meals to support an army when I'm done."

She doesn't see it, but the silver haired nin smirks deviously. There will be no more takeout for this man. No more soggy rice and oily noodles for him. Only safe, tasty, nutritious food prepared by a well practiced cook. If anything out of this mission agrees with him, it is her ability to make things so tasty.

His team will have to get through him to get to that stash. Going by the clenching of his kohai's fist, and the stiffening of the youngest's posture, they know it too.

"Stuffed buns, satay, bakso, bakmi goreng, eggplant parmesan, gumbo, char sui, maybe some walnut rolls?" she ponders out loud, tapping her fingers on the table. Tenzo shoots a look her way when she mentions walnuts, and Kakashi squints his eye at him. He doesn't know what a walnut roll is, but the man across from him will *not* be getting any. He didn't become a handler for a confusing, dangerous missing-nin so he could share what little good came out of their deal.

"Whatever, I'll make the basics and leave instructions if you can't just heat them back up in a pot or something. Broiled saury and eggplant miso can't be frozen nicely, so I'll just cook an enormous amount of that to be saved in the fridge," she says. Kakashi 'hmms' externally, but internally he is ridiculously pleased. Perhaps telling her his favorite dish payed off, in the end.

"Oh, and onigiri. Probably mostly with seaweed filling because I'm cheap, along with some sweets here and there because people deserve sugar." she finishes, and there is a list in front of her now with ingredient being scratched down with sloppy handwriting. The men are bewildered. Where did she get a pen and paper?

The youngest of their group looks at her at the mention of the onigiri. Somehow, in her list of foods, she has planned to cook every one of their favorites. There will be mutiny and war, Kakashi knows this, but the reward will be worth it in the end.

"Okay, so that's my plan. You guys can do you, and I'll head out and start cooking."

"I think that my team has training exercises, but I can stay," he says with a pointed glance.

For the first time, the feline masked man speaks.

"According to the rulebook, team training must be overseen by the commander," he counters in a monotone. Kakashi glares at him, because they both know what he meant.

The woman beside him snorts and gathers up the plates. Silently, the youngest begins to assist her and she melts. Apparently small things are her weakness. Kakashi is working at a disadvantage.

"I need to do some shopping first, Hatake never stocks ingredients because he's a cheap jerk," she says, and he has to stop from saying that he doesn't cook, so he has no need for ingredients.

"I can assist in payment. It is for the team after all," offers the little one, and she has to turn away from him to talk.

"No, ugh, that's fine. It's cool. This is my gift to you all," she forces and Kakashi grits his teeth. She has a weakness, and the boy knows. Cunning brat.

He decides to step up his approach, and he sees the man across from him do the same. Ryuishi never fully understands how she gets a full ANBU escort to the market. All she knows is that she feels weirdly watched and also like there might be a different reason than just suspicion of her motives.

All she knows is that she spends the day busting her ass in the kitchen, and somehow, food keeps disappearing. She's a high ranking missing-nin, so she does notice the crumbs on them all, but she just can't catch them in the act without fucking up one of the dishes. So it goes on even more.

She puts her skills to the test that day. Chopping and stirring and spicing like she hasn't done since her boys first hit puberty in Kiri. She swears to god she spots a blur of green and hears a crash at some point, but she's pretty busy sauteing the pork for the buns by then, assisted by the adorable masked child. She finds herself thinking that even if she can't trust Konoha one bit, their ninja are all a bunch of dorks and she might like hanging out with them anyway.

Too bad it won't stop her from leaving.

AN: I just want to say, for clarity reasons, that the night terror/ flashback? That is not regression. That is just a symptom of trauma, and is to be expected. The only reason I haven't made it so detailed in the past is because no one was there to see how bad they were. In past chapters she just calls them 'nightmares' or smothers them and brushes them aside. Also not healthy behavior. It also should be noted that she is super ashamed of her actions while not in her right mind. She hates vulnerability.

Hurrah for the return of cuddles, if only briefly! We have Tenzo back! And mysterious squad member? Also, Ryuishi is a really good cook and people like to eat her food! Somewhere, Kisame and Zabuza are feeling mighty disgruntled with no real reason. The next chapters are on the longish sides, because I can't stop rambling, and there is the final layout of her devious plot! Her endgame! Her goal! Sorta. It should be mentioned that the links to fanart on my profile aren't working, but I will send them if you ask!

I also want to address those asking if the duo will meet Naruto. I will only say that if that event happened, it would end badly. Don't expect it.

I want to thank my lurkers, my favoriters, and my followers. Bless you all. To my reviewers, I apologize if I have not messaged you back, but know I read every single one of them. They keep me going. They keep me strong.

A huge shout out to my beta Enbi, who makes my work readable. You could not imagine how bad I am at grammar. She puts up with my nonsense on the daily.

Question:What would happen if Kisame or Zabuza were there to witness her night terrors or flashback? How about any other character? OR Ryuishi decides she is sick of sleeping alone. It's cold and lonely, and she was built for cuddle. She puts out a discreet wanted ad with a very nice payment, who turns up to take the job and what happens?

Meeting the Plan(s)

I do not own Naruto.

At two seventeen in the morning, Watanabe Ryuishi finishes the last twist to her bun before pinning it in place. Her pack is a familiar weight on her back, comfortable and full, and the civilian dresses are sealed away, replaced by the breathable fabric of her cargo pants and supportive crop top.

She is as silent as the night as she stalks across the room, her stretching finished and warm-ups complete. She plans on putting as much distance between her and this village as possible. Her sandaled feet don't make a single noise, and she knows that when Hatake wakes up he might actually hate her for scenting up his apartment with as many conflicting smells as possible over the last couple of days.

She creeps over to the window, and with careful hands, she slides it open the smallest amount possible, knowing she can slither out of it with ease. The break in the patrol pattern gives her thirty minutes to make it to the other side of the city without detection.

She shifts her weight, going feet first, and is three quarters of the way out when the light flicks on.

Hatake stands at the entrance to the hallway, and for a second their eyes meet. She smiles, devious and charming, and salutes him sarcastically. Without words, she lets go of the railing and lets herself fall.

She backflips, pushing off the wall silently with her feet, landing on the neighboring building parallel to the ground. She flits through the night like she owns it, ducking into shadows and running across walls. She makes it to the other side of town with five minutes to

spare, slides into the tall trees of the training grounds, and doesn't look back.

There's a secret to her success when it comes to these things, honed down after years of doing it. Ryuishi isn't fast enough to outrun her pursuers, and she isn't strong enough to fight them all, but what she does have in spades is a rugged sort of endurance.

She slept only a few hours the night before, and spent the day cooking her ass off, but she does not halt in her movements, not once. She makes it outside the walls, and then into the surrounding forest, and she keeps going. She moves steadily in aggravating patterns, twisting around her own trails and moving through well traveled paths to hide her smell. She henges constantly, into men, into women, and into children. She jumps and runs and swims and climbs over and over again, until anyone trying to follow her would be run ragged, and she does it all without pausing. Maybe a great tracking unit could keep up with her for the first while, but there is nothing to track when you move unceasingly for days at a time. No food stops and canteens filled on the fly. No sleep either. Only escape, only travel.

(Well, she will admit she does stop to pee, but nobody can blame her. Bladder infections are quite literally the worst.)

The fact is, this is the reason she has kept up so well with others. Her endurance is incredible when she can keep her own pace, and it doesn't stop with travel. She can endure tons of shit, because she has to. She might be a huge baby when it comes to being hurt and in pain, but she can work through it, just like she can work through rage, fear, hunger, and cold.

She pushes, not hard, but continuously. She pushes and pushes and pushes. She pushes until she reaches Kusa, the Land of Grass, and keeps going until she's in the Land of Earth, where she careens toward the west, skirting the borders of Ame, fighting against the urge to go confront Kisame, down until she makes it to the Land of Stone. She pushes for days until she's back in the Land of Wind, and

then she collapses in a small inn near the border. There, she sleeps for eighteen hours straight and bathes the sweat and grime from her skin. She eats an inordinate amount of lentil-based food, sleeps some more, stretches out, and sets off once again. This time at a much more sedate pace.

She is almost home.

The only thing notable about this trip, other than the ridiculously long route, is that when she starts moving at a relaxed shinobi pace, somehow-and don't ask her how-she winds up in what could maybe classify as her worst fucking nightmare.

She's just minding her own business, trotting along, when she steps on a boulder to jump over it. Only the boulder crunches disgustingly under her foot, and when she looks down, there are an uncountable number of scarab beetles in a swarm. She feels the heavy, sluggish, freakishly strong movements of one against her toes in the middle of the desert and promptly reverts to a steaming hot mess. She shrieks like a songbird, high and sharp, and promptly tries to scramble away, tears in her eyes.

It turns out some species of beetles can fly. All she understands when the horrid little creature takes flight is that there is no longer light in the world, for she has been cast into hell.

The horror doesn't last long, because she darts out of there faster than a bullet leaving its chamber, gagging and patting herself off the whole way. It haunts her for days to come, and she checks her footing about a hundred times more often now.

When she does make it home, she breaths in and smiles because it no longer feels like a tomb. The sprawling expanse feels like possibility, and tastes like potential again. She checks the date. She has a few more days before her time is up, and she's going to spend it training and plotting.

After a hot meal and a whole night of sleep that goes uninterrupted, which is proof that socializing did something, she looks over Orochimaru's training program and promptly wants to shove a kunai in her own throat.

"Are you fucking kidding me?" she asks empty air.

What kind of monster did that man think she was? Ten hours of training a day? Was he out of his fucking mind?

She almost cries at the amount of sprinting he wants her to do. There's so much of it. Target practice is on there too, like she will somehow be able to strike better after years and years of trying. This is going to take forever. She might die. Did he think of that when telling her to encase four separate balls of water in chakra? Was he thinking about how hard it was going to be to get up to a single fucking A-rank jutsu? She was barely at normal holding capacity for that stuff! How the hell was she supposed to be able to use that in battle without draining herself dry? A triple fold contortion? She has something of a spine, for God's sake!

There's only one thing she can do.

Ryuishi walks into her room, comes out in her little black bikini, slathers herself in coconut oil, and gets to work. She can do multiple things at once. Things like tanning *and* exercise.

(It should be said that this practice will come into question later, when she no longer trains alone. Not many people know what to do with an oiled up woman wearing bits of fabric, stretching out under the sun. Sparring will be even worse on those sunny days.)

The physical training is exhausting, but it gives her time to think of what she is going to do to cement loyalties at least. Since she has begun, she has been settling refugees and spreading influence. Adding members to small communities and letting families grow and integrate themselves in their new towns.

It wasn't easy, not with the portion of the populace that fled Kiri being so large. They had to be spread out not to be noticed quickly. The Mumei, of course, continued their nomadic ways, living off the land and moving like the wind, untraceable and independent. She has no idea if Hanako will ever settle down, actually. The woman seems to love the life of freedom after being trapped in Kiri so long, and so do the people that follow her. They trade sometimes, but mostly they move like the tribes of old, holding onto little material possessions and celebrating in their communal lifestyle.

Many people did not follow their lead in this.

The whores and other sex workers that followed Kagami out had to be placed carefully to gain information effectively. Men and women had to be settled in red light districts and small brothels across the continent, only a few at a time. Many had to be moved more than once, due to the shitholes that slums can be, jumping from place to place until they found an Okiya that fit them. To be honest, she isn't sure that they would have ever found a place without Orochimaru's help. The access to health care and protection that came with the refugees really became the boost the others needed to accept outsiders in.

Protection provided, of course, by a number of bloodline users. Those of the Yuki, Hozuki, and Kaguya who left where mostly women and children used to a high lifestyle. They were the ones who heeded Ryuishi's warning of the upcoming purges, and some of the few that remained in this world. Many chose to hide, but those that didn't could be separated into two main groups: those who belonged to Ryuishi, and those who belonged to Orochimaru.

The ones who belonged to Ryuishi didn't actually belong to her in any way. They just did their own things and either tried out the civilian life, worked as traders, or became one of the founding protection groups for the civilians and sexworkers. They were the muscle when people started causing trouble amongst those under the Raki Ryuu's care. Kagami organized them to go where and when Ryuishi could not, smashing bandits and rapists and thieves. She

wasn't exactly comfortable letting them have the power of a pseudo-law-enforcement agency all by themselves, so there were non-clan members added to their numbers. Civilians picked up from petty crimes and given the chance to change or just volunteers. These groups were given a percentage of pay taken from the sex workers and traders for their service. She worried about them a lot, because there was so much room for corruption.

Those under Orochimaru were actually Orochimaru's, in the sense that he gave them housing and care so long as they worked for him. He was, and she fucking hated it, their militaristic leader. A fucking Kage. The only thing she was pleased about was that because of his success with those who willingly volunteered for experimentation before, he had made consent part of his practice. Not because he had morals, but because it gathered more data that held up under further testing because those being experimented on worked with him.

There was also a huge, enormous row over invasive child experimentation. She remembers it because of the scar it left around her neck, like a mark from a botched decapitation. To be honest, they never resolved it either.

She had told him that growth and hormone changes along with organ capabilities and the sheer, ridiculous amount of variables that came with children made them horrible test subjects. She had told him that it was morally repugnant and that nobody would respect him if it came to light. She told him it was wrong, and dangerous, and not acceptable. He told her that she was right about the growth and hormone changes, but that children were malleable, that they were adaptable. That he would cater to each body's needs and gather consent, and wasn't that enough? She had gone on about mental and cognitive development and its correlation to age, but he pointed out that she was a teenager and therefore subject to that same rule. Then he warned her once, exactly once, to stop talking.

In a fit, she had filled the room with her disgusting, tainted chakra, asked him if he knew many living-dead girls subject to natural law,

and spat at his feet. Faster than she could track, he pinned her to the ground, sliced through the flesh around her neck, and severed the muscles around her larynx. She had screamed without sound as he traced the blade around her neck with a cold, surgical precision. He left her there and watched as she bled and railed and cried. He healed her up when she exhausted herself. The first words out of her mouth had been a painful, "You're still fucking wrong."

They hadn't spoken of it since.

It grated on her that he was so brilliant and necessary for what she planned to do. There would be no Sound without a leader, there would be no military force and genius without him. There would be nothing stopping others from ruining her plans.

Ryuishi hissed as her distracted thoughts allowed a mizu bunshin to creep close enough to swipe her with a kunai blade, dodging and keeping in the stupid circles of stones she had to balance inside to heighten her dexterity.

"Plans" was right. A few more years, and she would be the force she needs to be. With Kusa, Tani, and Oto under her influence, fucking nothing could happen without her knowing about it and being able to react. She would have to be taken seriously, and people would be forced to listen to her.

Not to mention her plans for the Jinchuriki. Naruto and Gaara were the containers for the first and the last of the tailed beasts, and pivotal in the plot for canon. She might not be able to move heaven and earth like Naruto, but she could stop many things from happening. A whole village need not be invaded for Orochimaru to take vengeance on the Hokage, and Suna might be eradicated from his plans completely. With Gaara more stable, more lives are saved from his rampages in the long run, and he becomes Kazekage after fairly soon after his father dies. Oh, and that man would die. She has seen his children, and for that alone he would go. Not that she's going to do it. Orochimaru would probably love a scheme involving

her having control over a puppet king, which he would assume Gaara to be.

She also knows the exact moment the Akatsuki begin to make their move, thanks to her ties with Naruto. He also acts as her pace keeper for plot marks, assuming she hasn't screwed the plot all to hell.

Kakashi also centers in this. If she can keep feeding him information and get him to believe it, than she can begin to slip in knowledge of the future as well. She gets to whisper in so many people's ears, and at least one of them will have to listen.

The Akatsuki will never be able to withstand pressure from three separate sources, either. Ame isn't a rich country, and trade is a must for them. With Grass, River, and Rice, she can cut off food and textiles from most the world if she wanted. Not to mention the power struggle between religions. Maybe Nagato or whoever is seen as a god, but so is she in some circles, and she can usurp him. From there she can tag team with allied forces to either convert him, or move him out of the picture. She has to be careful though, because a holy war is not something that she wants. More like the spread of Buddhism than Christianity, she hopes.

Her main problem isn't even the butthurt Uchiha Obito. He needs mental help and to quit acting like a huge whiny bitch, and if isolated, she might be able to get him the help he needs. He's just a person, just a person who never learned to deal with negative emotions and overcome grief like a normal human being.

(She really shouldn't be talking though.)

No, her main enemy in this is that stupid, overpowered, douchebag of a plant man.

Zetsu is her main goal. Without him, there is no clone army, there is no resurrection jutsu, there is no huge divide that needs to be overcome. Zetsu is the manipulator of this all, Kaguya's will brought

to life, her vengeance and spite dividing the masses. Ryuishi needs to eliminate him, and then pick off the rest. Getting to him has always been her goal, but to get to him she needs to remove certain obstacles and boundaries in her way.

That's why she's setting herself up as a political power. That's why she's advising the trade routes and hoarding information. He is the whole reason she is training right now. Maybe she can't fix everything, and there are huge holes in her plans. Maybe she's a morales hypocrite working for a social movement she never believed in with a batshit crazy psychopath as a partner, but if she can do anything, she wants to kill that bicolored venus trap bastard. It will pave the way and make everything else about a million times easier.

The problem is she can't do it alone, and it takes a long time to set up the rest of her plans for the average everyday person. It's also so fucking tedious. So many details have to be taken into consideration, and the human element can lay waste to years of planning. People have to like her, they have to want what she wants. They have to believe in her and her ability, and she has to be able to pull this off herself. She has to be something she isn't-she has to be better. She *needs* to be better. Mental instability and emotional weakness won't help, so she has to keep planning, keep reacting.

Improvise, adapt, overcome . Her old family motto.

Ryuishi grits her teeth and feels the strain of her muscles, feels the sweat and oil on her skin. She keeps pushing, holding the chakra orbs full of trapped water in front of her while her clones attack. She can do this.

Does she want to, though? Something insidious and sad wails inside her. It rages against the constraint of this reality. It tells her that this is not home, it will never be home. It whispers and spits poison inside her head.

There are ways we can go back, it hisses. Kaguya can bend dimensions to her will, and Kamui can do the same. There are so many other worlds, she can find her own among them, surely.

So there is a war inside herself. There is the planning and the fighting inside, pieces of herself torn on what to do. A moral quandary, battling against a selfish desire. Does she have the right to impose her ideals of what is right and wrong on others? Who is she to decide so much? There is no right way, there is no absolute truth, there is only some sort of vague ethical guidelines from her past life, and the utter, heart wrenching desire to go back, to go *home* . At the same time, there is the need to protect what she has here.

She hedges her bets, and she plots against herself. Checks and balances, instead of limitless power over the people. Freedoms given to others to stop herself from fucking everything up. Trade and better quality of life for the lower classes, upwards movement and profit for the merchants, intrigue and respect for the nobles. This will cement loyalty and limit her own plotting.

A mirror image of herself throws sand in her eyes while snarling, and she twists out the way of another, who tries to gut her with a kunai. Her feet never leave the circle of stones, even though the chakra spheres in her hands tremble.

Whichever way she ends up choosing, it's going to take a hell of a lot of work to get there.

The days run out quickly, and before she knows it, she has her check-in date with Kagami. The wizened woman listens to her orders of focusing on the treatment of their force instead of the enlargement of it, and she knows what it means.

There is no hint of worry or suspicion in the older woman's eyes, and Ryuishi is content in knowing that her beloved partner kept his fat

mouth shut. For all the Okaa-san knows, Ryuishi was taking a fucking vacation for fun.

She is even halfway pleased when the woman breaks out a scroll from her obi and she read the missive from Orochimaru. More than the letter itself though, is the newest shipments of her medication. He tells her to write down any side effects she may notice and reminds her that the next time they meet, he will be gauging her skill level in the fullest extent.

She pauses stroking the little summon viper on her thigh at that. It hisses in protest, and Kagami eyes it warily, but Ryuishi is distracted by the fact that this is big. He isn't fucking around anymore if he means what she thinks he means.

Genjutsu. He wants her to use genjutsu in their spars. He wants her to use it on him. Practicing is one thing, but this?

She doesn't use that shit, not unless the fight is life or death. She hasn't been using it regularly since the war, instead relying on her Taijutsu and Bukijutsu skills, and maybe even ninjutsu here or there. The visions she shows people aren't nice, they aren't kind, and they are always, always tainted with Void chakra.

A physical wound can heal, even if it scars. A mental wound never goes away, not completely. It changes people.

She should know, she thinks bitterly. The Void was a frequent visitor in her dreams, hollow and empty and forever. It sits inside her gates like a sickness, never letting her fucking forget it. Like a slug inside her veins, oozing and wrong and just there.

She breathes out. She'll cross that bridge when she comes to it.

After Kagami's, she lets her thoughts turn to a lighter topic. It's been a little over two months since she has gotten to see her little brothers, and her heart warms knowing that she'll be able to be with her little otoutos soon.

Stone turns to forest, and forest gives way to river, and before she knows it, her feet hit sand. She makes sure not to run into anymore beetles this time, either.

Her heart beats heavy in her chest as the gate guard, now somewhat familiar with her face, checks her over. The man she first met there is working the check station again and she sees him pocket some lemon hard candy. She smiles victoriously.

"Haven't seen you in a while," he says with that blank, emotionless face that all Suna shinobi seem to have.

"Oh, boss had to negotiate some new contracts and I got caught up in the mess," she tells him. "I'm glad to be back, though. I missed being here."

(He looks at her for a moment more, and she smiles at him. The way his cheeks begin to turn a soft pink goes unnoticed by her, as fixated on Gaara as she is.)

"You were missed as well," he states in a bland voice, and she sees another one of the guards swivel to watch them.

"That's very kind of you to say. Thank you."

When the security check continues, she doesn't miss the smirk the nameless guard sends the man next to her. She notices the piece of paper hurled at lightening speeds at the smug looking face as well, but pretends not to. It would be a little too fast for a civilian to spot.

She gets out of there fairly soon after that, because whatever is going on in there totally has nothing to do with her.

Ryuishi walks the streets painted in bright, pupil searing light. The arid, sandy wind blows through the boob-dome buildings like always, and the smell of hot baked earth and dust fills her nostrils. The long, dusty road is almost empty because of the time, high sun, and she

knows most the population is doing whatever it is they do when the world burns around them.

The heat soaks into her muscles like a welcome massage, loosening them and sapping the tension away. She treks through the town, heading towards another randomly chosen hotel, her heart thrumming in her chest and her legs carrying her onward with a confident, benign swagger. A gust blows her long hair, and for a second she thinks it will look really cool, right until the bangs framing her face whip up into her smiling mouth and she has to spit them out and drag them away.

So much for a sweet entrance.

She huffs and checks into her hotel, knowing that she has been seen by watchers inside the shadows of the buildings. She also knows that Suna ANBU will be dispatched shortly to watch her.

As she sets up her room, she wonders if they watch her all the time. Do they watch her when she pisses? When she sleeps? When she showers?

She doesn't actually care. Nudity ain't shit to her. Okay, it might be a little embarrassing if they watch her piss, though. Mostly because, well... she's *peeing*. That shit's private. Her shits should also be private, thinking about it. Sleep is fine either way though. She basically consented to being creeped on the moment she started hanging out with their resident outcast.

The thoughts chase her all the way until she sinks into the stuffy, starchy sheets of the bed and heads to sleep.

The next morning, she wakes to a tangled mess of sheets wrapped around her body like snakes and a thin sheen of sweat glimmering on her skin. Fall in Suna is about a billion times too hot, even with air conditioning. The sunshine creeping through her windows is enough to make her combust. She still prefers it to the cold, though.

With a huff, she untangles herself and stretches out, her bones popping, and heads towards the bathrooms to get ready for the day. After hygiene and styling, which eats up a whopping hour and a half, she takes to the streets to amble around and pretend to sell candy, as is her wont.

Strangely enough, she is the one to find Gaara this time. Little Gaara, who has run to her since she began showing up.

He's on the swing set, sitting dejectedly where they first met. Her breath catches in her throat for a second, because it has been a little over two and a half months, but he is so changed already. He's grown up in that spectacular way that only children can, taller and stronger, more at ease with his body. She has to bite her lip and choke down tears for a second, because she never realized just how much she missed him, how much she has come to love the little boy in front of her, kicking sand and swaying back and forth.

"Otouto," she says, and even over the sounds of wind and other children, he hears her, his head snapping up to look for her. She sees his sea-foam eyes widen, and she is so ridiculously proud for no reason at all. He is beautiful, her little Gaara.

"Aneue?" he whispers, and she is rushing forward, beckoned by her name alone, smiling like a damn fool. Her arms are outstretched and ready, and he only has to amble a few steps before she has him in her embrace, clutched tight against her. Her hands are running down his back and her fingers are cradling his head in her shoulder.

"Where were you?" he asks, and he sounds so sad, so lonely that her heart breaks, and she is telling him before she can even think of lying.

"I got hurt and I got sick and I couldn't come back. I'm so fucking sorry. I'm here now," she says, and his hands fist in her clothes. His sand rustles around them, spurred into movement by the strong emotions.

"You came back. You said you would, and you did," he tells her, and she coos over him, a pleased sound escaping her lips.

"You got hurt, though. You can get hurt, and you can get sick," he whispers.

"Doesn't matter, I'm better now," she says. *Getting better, always getting better*, she thinks.

He doesn't speak, instead he buries his face inside the crook of her neck, safe and sound in her arms. If she could hold him and Naruto like this forever, she would be happy.

"I missed you, little brother," she tells him.

He takes a deep breath, inhaling her scent and luxuriating in the coolness of her skin for the first time in what seems like forever. She was sick when she left, and she got hurt. Aneue could get hurt and sick and then she wouldn't be able to see him. He didn't get sick, ever, and he had only gotten hurt the one time she showed him what hurt was.

It was dangerous out there for her. So many things could happen to her, and then she couldn't be there. It scared him.

"I missed you too," he says against her throat, squeezing his arms tighter around her neck, and soft coughing sound emanating from her.

"Ack-hey there now, little too strong," she warns him, and he puzzles over it for a moment.

"Loosen up around the neck," she says clearly, and he 'ahhs' in understanding, loosening his hold and taking a step back. She laughs, and the husky sound of it warms him just as much as the snaggletooth smile he can see on her face. He remembers her last visit, her distant stares and quiet aloofness, and he is glad that she is better.

Her hand settles on his shoulder, and the other goes to cup his face. He cannot feel her skin, but he can feel the coolness of her body through the shell and the pressure against the shifting granules of his armor.

"Ah! Look at you! Growing up so strong and cute!" she states, and he feels a proud smile creep across his face. Aneue says things that others don't, things he likes to hear. To her, he is not a monster or demon. He isn't the Kazekage's son or his mother's child. To Aneue, he was Gaara, and that was enough for her.

"What am I going to do if you keep growing up so fucking fast?" she mockingly asks him.

"Not say bad words?" he responds cheekily, and she huffs out in fake shock.

"Rude. I can't stop cursing anymore than I can stop breathing. It's in my nature," she informs him sagely.

He sends her a blank look and she laughs again, standing up and ruffling his hair before batting some of the dust off her pants where she kneeled in the sand.

"Whatever. Let's go play," she says, holding out her hand for him to take.

He places his fingers in her own, and feels something like worry in his heart be put to rest. Something warm and glowing grows in its place. Something bright, and something *happy*.

AN: Okay, before I get into this chapter, I want to say, the goal here is what was stated, but also, that I had help with it. I had three very important people help me out when I needed it, when I was feeling down and depressed. Thank you for all your help. Bless you.

Now! The plot! Her main goal! All the civilization building, for what end? So she can get people to listen to her warnings and attract the attention of the one fucker who loves to tear civilizations apart. Zetsu. Or maybe even... home? BUM BUM BUM. Also, Gaara and the jinchuriki? She loves them, but she has plans. Selfishness wars with manipulative nature.

I want to thank you all. My lurkers, my favoriters, and my followers. I especially want to thank my reviewers. I was down, and reading your guys's messages cheered me back up. It gave me the will to keep writing.

Bless my beta Enbi, because she listened to my shit. They were one of the three. I cannot thank them enough for being there

Question: You, the reader, walk into the bar and there is Ryuishi. What do you do? Is there shenanigans? OR Character - walks into a bar, and there is Ryuishi. What goes down?

Meeting Tangles

I do not own Naruto. Or Lynyrd Skynyrd.

Ryuishi croons softly, her husky voice low and smooth as she continues her actions, pretending to not notice the Anbu guard tailing them. She can feel their watchful eyes on her, like an itch on her neck. Gaara focuses silently at the task at hand, his little arms moving smoothly even though she knows he is unsure of what, exactly, they are doing.

" Mama told me when I was young

Come and sit beside me my only son

And listen closely to what I say

It will help you some sunny day," she sings, her hands flourishing as she draws another line in the sand, the late afternoon sun heavy on her back and shoulders. She's glad she put her hair up, because she would be soaked in sweat by now if she hadn't. Like, ridiculously slick and sweaty.

Gaara continues to scribble his tantric pattern beside her, their swirling design taking up a few square feet. She maintains that her drawing skills aren't the best, but their combined zen tangle is really shaping up. Who knew the little redhead had the patience and calm to draw such a complicated pattern?

" Oh take your time, don't live too fast

Troubles will come and they will pass," she lilts, branching off of the main design to have it circle around and swirl. It's soothing, and that's really the point. She has few hobbies and outlets, and she swears if she can't have them, Gaara will.

He's turning six soon.

The thought makes her nervous and scared, her heart thudding heavy in her chest. She is afraid for him, so so afraid. Canonically, six is the age where he has his first assassination attempt.

The thought also makes her spitting mad, for various reasons. The first, and foremost, is that she sees no reason for it. Yes, Gaara hurts people at times with his sand. It isn't malicious, or cruel, he isn't doing it just because he can yet. He hurts people because he is afraid and has little to no control when he becomes emotional. It acts on whims and thoughts, with a mind of its own. She knows he doesn't mean to do half the shit he does, and she has taken the brunt of many of the attacks.

The rubber ball was the first incident, and it only stretched out from there. When she pushes him on the swings, or moves too fast around him. When he is scared or upset, it reaches out defensively and tries to remove the stimulus. That's how it works for now, and she knows the more control he gets over his chakra and emotions, the more that will begin to disappear. If he wasn't training to be a shinobi, it might not even happen now. Nothing makes a child more unsure and nervous than being constantly trained to watch out for people trying to cut his throat. The civilian derision and spite isn't helpful either.

Basically, there's a good fucking chance Gaara would have more control if the world didn't treat him like shit.

It doesn't stop there, though. There's never a point she can remember the series ever laying out a date for when the event would go down. Just the vague 'when he was six' bullshit, and there is no way she can camp out in Suna for a whole year. It just isn't feasible. There's too much to do with the Mumei, Orochimaru, and Naruto.

Even if she could though, she couldn't save him without blowing her cover as a missing-nin and never being allowed to come back. Sneaking to see him like she does Naruto would be impossible,

because of his status as the Kazekage's son. Security is tighter than a chokehold around the kid, and the only reason she is being let through is because of her own status as a well-liked trader and civilian.

" You'll find someone, you'll find love

And don't forget, there is someone up above," she huffs.

She can't stop it from happening, if it is going to. She can only continue on her path. She would kill both his uncle and father if she could, but her hands are tied. One is the motherfucking Kazekage and probably far above her level of skill, the other is that same Kage's brother in law, giving him some political clout. Not to mention ANBU or some shit. An attack on either one of them would have gigantic ramifications on the current sociopolitical climate she is attempting to cultivate, not to mention, she isn't sure she has the right to cast judgement like that. She never has been sure, she just kills for convenience. She knows it's morally twisted and wrong, but hey, it's convenient, and she doesn't really eliminate those who haven't tried to get her or hers first.

Regardless, she can't just kill them, she can't talk them out of it without revealing herself and her secrets, and she can't stop it in the exact moment, because she doesn't even know if it will happen in this world, or when it would even occur. She can't stop a lot of things. She doesn't have the power, or the reach. In short, all she can do is focus on Gaara and try to give him an out, a way other than a giant psychotic break to overcome the trauma.

" Be a simple kind of man

Be something you can love and understand

Baby, be a simple kind of man,

Oh won't you do this for me son, if you can," she sings, and Gaara blinks at the sound, as if coming out of some sort of trance, his grip

on his stick loosening.

He casts his big, beautiful eyes on her and she feels that painful ache inside of her. She can't even tell him what's coming. It would get out, and others would know, and they would assume she was converting him, trying to poison him against his home. Or they would kill her for being a spy.

"Aneue," he says simply.

"Yes, otouto?" she answers, still dragging her own twig through the beige grains.

"How do you know so many songs?" he asks, blinking. She hums, a noncommittal noise.

"My family liked it. There was a lot of music in my house."

There was. Technology had allowed it, had filled her childhood with crooning and song since before she could remember. Free use of radio and musical devices had allowed that music to go wherever she was, and they stuck in her head like glue. There isn't as much access to it now, and silence can be stifling, so she sings.

Talking about her family still hurts, and the ache has faded, but she doesn't think it will ever go away. Her old world was *hers*, and she may not have loved some of it, but it was her everything. The poverty, the struggle, the love, they made her who she was.

"Do you still have a family?" he asks, and she knows he's just being curious, but the bluntness of his question pokes her in the bleeding of her soul.

"Not in this world," she tells him calmly. "I have other people I care about. People like you."

He looks stunned at the statement, his eyes wide and his mouth open just a little bit. She lets her thoughts drift away from the dark

places they have lingered on and focuses on the absolutely adorable expression on his face.

Her free hand reaches out and ruffles his hair, and she laughs a little. " *Dork*," she teases lightheartedly. "What kind of face is that? It's too cute to exist!"

He huffs, and she can see red creep up his cheeks. The fact baffles her everytime it happens. There's a fucking sand shell around him, how the hell does sand blush? Is there, like, redder pieces mixed in that flood to the surface? Are they some sort of oxidised iron particles? Why is it even necessary?

She pauses. She is in a world where people can magic themselves up some elements to do glorious battle, and they can use the magic to heal and stick to walls as well. Sentient giants made of that same energy walk the earth, and they get stuffed inside people's bellies, bound by ink and willpower. People can bleed and mumble nonsense and summon animals. Both of her best friends have naturally sharp teeth, and one is blue-gray by birth.

Sometimes, it was really fucking weird to remember how crazy things are from an outside perspective.

"I'm not-" he starts, and she can see the beginning of a pout. She grins, her hand slipping from his head.

"Super cute. Super duper cute. Strong, capable, and cute. That's my otouto," she says before he can replace it with something like 'handsome' or get offended. No gender roles in her presence, no sir. Not today.

" *You're* cute!" he blurts out in return, and she reels back, staring at him incredulously. He looks even more embarrassed, even as he attempts to smother it down with his blank facade.

She is unsure if he is trying to tease her back or if he actually believes she is cute. "Okay?" she answers, her brow raised

incredulously.

He breathes in deep, another thing she's taught him, in a way. She knows for a fact he breathes the same way she does when trying not to yell 'piss off!' at people glaring at a toddler. *Seven in, hold four, seven out* . That was her thing, and now, it is their thing.

"Okay," he tells her, and she shrugs whatever the fuck just happened off. Go with the flow, she tells herself.

Only, the flow isn't very strong today. She's not feeling one hundred percent ready to do anything at all. Her motivation has taken a vacation and disappeared, and she's left floundering for what to do. There aren't many recreation activities in the middle of the desert other than wondering around, and she's almost certain they've done them all several times over. She feels the desire to spend her time somewhat productively, but also yearns to doze somewhere in the shade. Her thoughts have drained the energy from her. It's frustrating.

Gaara seems content with whatever, which is good.

"I'm tired," she tells him honestly, giving up on any pretense. The boy blinks slowly and nods his head in understanding.

"Wanna take a nap?" she asks him, standing up from her crouch and dusting the sands off of her pants.

She watches him consider it thoroughly, his head tilting ever so slightly to the side. Then, after a few seconds, he nods slowly, approaching her with his arms stretched wide, using the universal symbol of children everywhere asking to be carried.

She acquiesces, bending to lift him and settle him on her hip. He's getting heavier as time goes on, but she is strong. Her pack still weighs more than he does anyway.

"Alright, otouto, point me to the good napping places in your village," she says loudly, and she can almost feel the judgemental gaze of the ANBU guards. She doesn't mind it, though. They're probably just jealous she gets to sleep.

His tiny hand points behind them, followed by a trickling trail of sand around his fingers. The wafting scent of sandalwood and heat drifts off him, and she luxuriates in it. She doesn't find it too weird that a kid who can't sleep knows these things, either. He's pretty aware of his surroundings, for a soon-to-be six year old.

Their walk takes them further into the cluster of buildings and the shade they moment she walks into the darkness, she can feel the temperature difference. It's enormous, and while it isn't cool by any means, it isn't the broiling heat of sunlight. She can almost taste the relief she feels, and the wind channeling through the pathways is the icing on the cake.

Silence and ANBU are their companions as she follows the young boy's directions, and she appreciates the calm nature of it. The reliability of the behavior, the surety of the actions. It's a stability she hasn't really ever appreciated before. She takes the time to do so now.

Eventually, they wind up in some sort of courtyard, where a single, scraggly bush grows in the center of cracked earth and sand. The whole area is cool and sleepy, and she likes the quaintness this little haven offers. She would have never found it if she hadn't had a local with her.

She smiles and eyes everything discreetly. The bench doesn't look comfortable, and the ground is... well, the ground, but there is a ledge jutting out of one of the buildings that looks promising. She has no fucking clue why it is there, because it looks like it serves absolutely no purpose in the grand scheme of things.

"Dibs," she calls out, to no one. Who's gonna take it from her? Gaara? The ANBU?

She shifts the child on her hip to her back, where he silently re-arranges his grip, his hands on her shoulders, then walks over and clambers up the four foot high wall without a purpose. For a second she feels like an ape carrying offspring, but it passes. Which is great, because she has a certain distaste for monkeys and apes. Disgusting creatures.

She straddles the width of it before settling down on her belly, draped over the top of the wall like a jaguar in a tree, her head resting in the crook of a folded arm. Gaara takes this as a sign and sits firmly on her lower back.

"Can I play with your hair?" he asks.

Ryuishi huffs and closes her eyes, blowing her long bangs out of her face. "Sure kiddo, just be gentle," she answers.

She feels a tug on her carved bone pin, cautious and wary. It only budes a little, wrapped tightly as it is in her twisted rope of hair. It happens again, this time upwards instead out, and she hears the faint click of the beads dangling from it as they sway. Once more it happens, and the sharp white bone is pulled out and her long length of hair spins down, sliding across her back and neck to dangle below them. The floral, musky smell of her conditioner fills the air. She drowns as a gust of wind blows by, dragging sand particles across her skin. She's glad she moisturized this morning.

"Aneue?" she hears, just as little finger begin to work out her ponytail. She hums out, letting him know she has heard.

"What is sleep?" he asks.

Ryuishi mulls that question over in her head. She not really surprised he asked, per se, it's just not a question she ever truly thought about. Sleep is just one of those things that happens, like eating, or breathing. It's hard to put into words. She guesses that as someone who either never slept, or who only slept very rarely, it is a very good question. She would wonder the fuck out of it too.

"Sleep is a lot of things," she starts off. "A doctor friend of mine once said sleep is when the nervous system relaxes and the eyes close. Our bodies fill up with, er, what the fuck is it called?"

"Bad language."

" Yes, thank you Gaara. Serotonin! That's it. They fill up with serotonin and other things. That's the literal interpretation I guess, but sleep to me is like... hmm. It's like finishing the chapter in a book, or taking a break for a while. You hang in a state of being alive and not being alive in the best sort of way," she murmurs.

He is quiet as he fiddles with the stands of black, and she is glad she decided to stop putting the barbed wire in it when visiting the child. It would be weird for a merchant to do.

"That's weird," he tells her in the frank manner that only a child can accomplish.

"Well, so is everything if you think about it. Like, why do things taste good when other things don't? Why do people even have hair? The fuck is language? Why can we look at lines on a page or hear a weird jumble of noises and take meaning from it?"

Somewhere out of eyesight, a turban-wearing ANBU's eyes widen in shock. The woman made a point, and they never thought about it like that. What else hadn't they thought of? What sort of things did they take for granted every day?

Ryuishi continues on, unknowing of the existential crisis she just put the ANBU in. "Why the hell do people sing? What is life? Tons of questions are weird, and some of them have no answers we know of. Weird is just... it's everywhere," she finishes lamely.

She feels the shock radiating out from the child on her back. She bets that if she could see his face it would be wide and stiff again, frozen in place. The face of 'woah' she has seen on many people before.

Ryuishi snorts into the crook of her arm.

The day before she departs is marked by excessive clinginess on Gaara's part, and a steady incline of customers trying to buy out her wares before she goes. It seems that Suna had missed her delightful treats in her absence, if the way they are still willing to approach with the proclaimed demon on her hip is anything to go by.

Then again, she's been seen with the kid a lot by now, and she hasn't up and died. Sure she's sported a plethora of bruises and scrapes and friction burns from his sand, but she hasn't been found mangled on the street, crushed by the intense pressure of a desert coffin. That must speak to them on some sort of level.

The funny thing is, it mostly says things to the upper ranks of shinobi and kunoichi. If she had to guess, they believe that if a harmless civilian trader can get by the monster, then big, strong ninja like them are fine. Which is stupid. Everybody would be fine if they didn't fuckin' push the kid.

Gaara tightly grips the fabric of her shirt, his hands fisted around the chest area, his head laid against her shoulder. His adorable, piercing eyes scanning over everything almost unblinkingly, taking in the busy morning street.

On either side vendors sell their wares, quieter than in Konoha, and less crowded as well. She doesn't feel as apprehensive or nervous as she did with Hatake either, even with ANBU watching. Here, she is the one selling her goods, and her prices are generally fixed. She has no need to make a profit.

There is also the fact that she isn't being forced out of her comfort zone. Her relationship with Gaara has already been defined, and her role as big sister is flexible and fitting. She doesn't have to strain and stumble to try and make something grow, to feel fondness and attachment instead of wariness and guarded hope.

In Suna, she is the candy woman from the Land of Rivers who lost her brothers and adopted a demon. She is rough around the edges, but kind and easy to approach. She's a civilian with no dangerous past and no skill in battle. She has her role, and here it is almost exactly who she is, so she can fill it and not feel terrible.

A breeze blows through the bazaar, and the hanging bolts of colorful cloth casting shade ripple and sway in the wind. The light filtering through dances, and she sees the shadow of her watchers flit in the corner of her eye, but pays no heed to the action. She does not mind.

A tall, blond-haired woman approaches her in the lithe, confident way of a shinobi, her green eyes locked on her. Chuunin, if her vest and the way she carries herself are anything to go by. She smiles, and oh man, Ryuishi might be a little attracted to that grin. Maybe. Probably. No, yeah, she totally is. Alright then, time to see if she can still do this.

"Morning," the woman chirps.

"Good morning." Ryuishi replies with a smile of her own. The only reason she isn't fiddling with her bangs is because her hands are full. *Fuck* .

"Glad to see you back in town. Some of us thought you might have headed to greener pastures." the woman says, and she does not miss the way the blonds eyes scan over her body in a quick, pleased way. Inside her chest, her heart sings. Oh man. Oh yes .

"Greener pastures can be tempting, but Suna has too many beautiful sights to just leave." Ryuishi says, pointedly returning the look. The nameless woman's grin turns into something satisfied, like she just discovered a pleasant surprise. The missing-nin sure hopes she did.

"Oh, is that right?" she asks, her hand going to rest on her side.

"Sure is. One of them is standing right in front of me," she tells her smoothly. It earns a pleased bark of laughter from the stranger. She mentally congratulates herself for being so smooth. It's a good change. Maybe this persona is helping, or maybe it's the fact that she doesn't actually care about this woman in a romantic sense.

"You know, I came here for some of those raspberry gummies you have, but I think I might like to have something else as well," she replies, and cheering goes off inside her head. Her own smile might turn a little sultry as well.

"Well, what can I give you then kunoichi-san?" Ryuishi asks coyly, looking at her through half lidded eyes. This is going great. She's usually a sputtering mess by this point.

"How about your name, and a date?" she answers. Green eyes meet coal and the smug satisfaction of the both of them is heavy in the air. Ryuishi leans in closer, and the woman takes a step forward. She is just about to answer when a wall of sand erupts between them, forcing them apart.

Ryuishi squawks as she stumbles back and she hears an indignant hiss from the other side. Somebody shrieks from a nearby stall, and the sound grates on her nerves.

"Gaara!" she says in shock, her eyes going to accusingly to the child in her arms. He blinks, the perfect picture of innocence, wide eyes on a cute face.

She turns to where the wall of sand is merging with the ground once again, looking for the blond.

"Are you okay?"

"Yah, I'm... I'm fine." the woman answers, her gaze locked on some of the still floating sand particles. She seems shaken. "Actually, now that I think about it, I have some things I should get to. I'll see you around," she calls out, turning around and going the other way.

Ryuishi stands, gobsmacked and startled in the middle of the bazaar. Around them, people begin to turn their attention away and resume their normal activities, as if this never happened. She turns to glare accusingly at the child on her hip, her lips pursed and brow furrowed. She clenches her jaw and the totally nonplussed expression on his face greets her.

"I'm hungry," he states simply, and she inhales to begin berating him for his actions. His expression changes, his eyes going wide and his lower lip jutting out. The boy tugs cutely on her shirt, laying his head against her shoulder.

"Please, Aneue?" he asks, and she has no idea where he learned this face, but she can't. She just can't.

Ryuishi sighs. "Fine. Whatever."

She leaves Suna the next morning, still unsure how to feel about being cockblocked by her pseudo little brother.

AN : More future stuff! Kinda. In a way. Mostly Ryuishi ruminating over how she can't always get her way. So sad. Uhm, other than that, we have a bit more of Ryuishi's flirty side, which has been mentioned before but as she gets older will emerge more. Before anybody asks, in my head, she's pansexual. She has been from the start. I've made hints here and there, but now it's concrete. It should be said though that Ryuishi is normally as smooth as crunchy peanutbutter. This time was an exception. She wasn't embaressed because she wasn't seeking romance if you get my drift. Also, Gaara is a possessive brat who will do many things for aneues undivided attention.

Next chapter, if I remember correctly, has Naruto. Remember why she is here and why she needs these two. It's plot, I swear.

I want to thank my readers, my favoriters, and my followers. I also want to give a shout out to my reviewers. Honestly, your understanding and your kind words made me so, ridiculously happy.

Thanks, as always, to my beta Enbi, who deserves sunshine and rainbows.

Question: Ryuishi decides she misses the party scene from her old world. She builds the elemental countries first good old bump-and-grind club. Supposing that they follow the no murder-no maim rules, who goes there and what nonsense happens? OR Submit your ninja pick up lines. I'm talking 'master of the gentle fist' and 'wetter than a suiton'. Do it.

Meeting Progression

I do not own Naruto.

Traveling the distance between Suna and Konoha is a bit harder for Ryuishi this time around. Admittedly, it's because she is multitasking, but it still amps up the difficulty level.

Training is a constant thing, and she knows she cannot get by without doing it. Too many people are ridiculously overpowered in this world, and she is but a medium-sized fish in a sea that contains leviathans. Seriously, shit's ridiculous.

So, it takes her longer, but she trains her body as she goes. Each morning she does her usual stretches, and then she pushes past her limits, curling and twisting into shapes that she knows for a fact are ridiculously unnatural. The feeling of her muscles pulling so much hurts, and she is always so tempted to quit. She can feel them being pushed past the point of tautness, the near-ripping feeling of her ligaments as she contorts.

After a dewy-eyed session of stretching, she summons up a water clone, trying to use as little chakra as possible. Then another, and another. She hands some kunai, and others get small senbon, but most retain their fists.

Then she sets them off into the surrounding areas to hide and attack whenever they think they can surprise her.

The limited consciousness of clones is a strange thing. Mizu bunshin do not talk very much, and they have no concept of higher thoughts, but they seem to have access to the same things her body does, because they attack her in ways she would. While it seems limiting, the fragmentation of her mind means there's a lot of perspectives to consider, and the clones get this as well. In short, her clones are

scrappy and creative as fuck when they ambush her, and while she can usually get them before they get her, they still leave bruises and cuts across her body.

As night will settle down, she moves through the jutsu she knows, practicing the speed of her handsigns. She doesn't want to waste chakra, because there is always a chance she will be attacked. Being a wanted ninja, alone on the roads and backways, it is always a possibility.

This, on top of the rugged, hardy pace she keeps, tires her out. She gets worn, and kind of tired, so she sneaks in Konoha with all the lazy grace of a cat. Which is to say, still graceful, but so very lazy.

Ryuishi winds up at Misaki's brothel somewhere around two in the fucking morning, after the working night is mostly over. She stands in the small, cramped alley, dirty from travel, cold from her river entrance, and weary from all of the above. She knows it's not the image she should present to her people, but she feels like effort to give a shit is more than she has in her at the moment.

She doesn't even try to sneak in either. She sorta just knocks on the back door.

It opens up with a polite and courteous, "Yes?"

The soon-to-be seventeen year old just gives the man a weary look. "Please, a bath," she mumbles.

She must look pitiful, because he croons and sweeps her inside with a wave of fluttering hands and soothing sounds. She thinks he knows who she is, and she vaguely recognizes his bright whiskey-colored eyes and auburn hair. Kosuke? Kisuke?

"Oh, Ryuu-hime!" and yep, he definitely knows who she is, "You must be exhausted! Two months away, doing who knows what! You work too hard," he gushes as he rushes her through the kitchens. He

turns to one of the women inside and bites off a quick, "Get Misaki-sama."

Ryuishi hums in her throats as he frets, clucking over the state of her hands, which are callused and dirty from working with her meteor hammer. "Just a bath, and then bed," she says quietly.

"Of course, of course! The baths are waiting. There may be some workers in there cleaning up after the night, but we do separate tubs here, as you know," he assures her.

He grins at her, and she smiles weakly back. "Many thanks, Keisuke."

His grin turns into a luminous smile that seems to melt some of the nervousness away from his face. It's funny how simply she can please some people. The negligent act of remembering his name, a common courtesy, has made his night.

She slides into the steam-filled room as he hurries away, and she can hear laughing and talking. She doesn't have to even look that hard for an empty tub, as the paper screen dividers between them are only slid open if the room is empty. The dividers in between them can even be opened for socialization reasons as well. Or for customers who want that experience, she guesses.

She tries not to wonder exactly how much sex her bath has seen as she strips off her clothes and undoes her hair. It doesn't exactly bother her, considering she grew up in a brothel where the baths were regularly used for that sort of thing. She knows they are cleaned well each day. It's just that if she imagines how many people did the do in this tub, she's going to start wonder how many people frick frack all over the place. Ninja are weird like that. They just sneak it in everywhere. Like, it's basically an Olympic-level sport to hook up with people in random places and not get caught.

As she rinses off the worst of the dirt and grime, Ryuishi thinks that this world has some very unique kinks. Chakra-enhanced senses,

low level genjutsu, sticking to random surfaces, and multiple cloning techniques all add up to a pretty crazy bedroom life. Hell, cloning techniques meant a partner wasn't even required. Just summon a duplicate and get down to business like some sort of perverted wizard.

... Not that she would know anything about that.

Ryuishi coughs into her fist and hopes there aren't any Yamanaka nearby. She generally hopes that, but now she sorta really hopes it.

Finished rinsing, she fills the tub with piping hot water and digs through her bag, dragging out the scroll with her bathing goods sealed inside. A breath and a flash of chakra later, bottles of perfumes, oils, soaps, razors and loofahs pop out. She grabs a bottle and churns it into the tub, letting the tub fill up with frothy white bubbles.

A single, slow step later and she is up to her neck in heat and comfort. She hums out, pleased, and settles down for a quick soak.

She dozes a bit, actually, her mind wandering and emptying. Her nose fills with the scent of her pear blossom soap, and her eyes droop. Her chin dips low into the water until only her nose and eyes are free. Breathing even, she begins to relax. She only perks back up when somebody slides the screen besides hers opens. Turning her head to view whoever it is, she almost inhales a mouthful of water.

Misaki swaggers inside, obviously fresh from her own bath, hair wet and bathrobe on. Her blue eyes are positively predatory.

"Ryuu-hime, I am glad to see you once more. You have been missed," the older woman sings out. While not bothered in the least by the near nudity, Ryuishi is actually kind of scandalized by the look she is receiving.

One does not reciprocate their follower's ogling, she chants inside her head. This is a poor practice that displays favoritism and divides the mass. It's also hella rude, even if you know she digs you. Do not respond to the older woman.

"Misaki-san, I am glad to see you as well," she responds coolly, wiping away the bubble beard she received in her flailing. Her acting is still top notch, she deigns to notice.

"I am glad that you're glad," she whispers back, sidling up to the tub the missing nin reside in.

"Misaki-san, I... Uh-" she tries to say, but the older woman pays no heed to her stuttering and kneels behind her, picking through the soaps.

"Hush, now. I'm just helping you get clean. It is my honor to do so."

"No need for that. You've probably had a hard day at work. Please, I can wash myself-" she starts, but then something in her brain burns out when slick hands begin to rub the juncture of her shoulder and neck.

"Really, let me," the woman coos, and Ryuishi melts. A beautiful woman is giving her a back massage, and she decides the world is at peace. She'll stick with her earlier choice and not wear herself out by giving any fucks.

"Nothing more," she says, just to be sure. She can almost feel the satisfaction pouring off the woman in waves.

"Nothing more," the woman agrees. And so Ryuishi, a strong, capable, independent kunoichi, melts like butter under the older woman's clever hands.

"You've been gone a while, were there complications?" the woman asks after a few moments of silence. The criminal hums, trying to

focus. She never realized how sore she was, or how tense. Sweet Hera smiting dishonest men, Misaki should become a masseuse.

"Somewhat. There are things I need to pass on. Did you get my letter?" the teenager asks.

"Of course," Misaki answers. She had received a personal letter from the Lucky Dragon herself, no way she was forgetting that. It had even smelled like her princess, and the biggest tragedy of her life was when she had to burn it in order to destroy any incriminating evidence. It broke her heart.

"We have been reeling back our whispers and focusing on work. We make sure to keep our involvement with Naruto-chan seemingly circumstance, with randomly rotating brothels, parks, and other establishments."

Here she hesitates, because she does not want to question her leader, but she is curious as to why they had to do such things.

The benevolent and wise Lady knows her though, she understands. She answers the silence while Misaki works out the tension in her Lady's strong, capable shoulders.

"I have become known to the shinobi here," she says in her husky voice. "If they think I am going after the boy, they will drive me out and go any influence I have here. If they know I am here, with you, they will hurt you for helping me."

Misaki's heart burns. Her kind lady, always looking out for her people. "I understand," she coos, just as she reaches a knot, working it free.

Ryuishi practically purrs under her ministrations. She's telling the truth. If Konoha sees her ingratiating herself with Naruto, they will get rid of her quicker than a moldy slice of bread. Jinchuuriki are important power sources. She still wants to be friends with Kakashi, though. In the end, it just means she has to play a game. On one

side there is Kakashi, another the Hokage, and on the other there is Naruto. Somewhere, she is also on a side, but always moving. Hopefully, so much so that the first two never know of her involvement with the third until they trust her, or, probably just never.

The Mumei will help her hide and give her excuses along with contacts and resources she can use to balance it out. So, later she will see Kakashi, but for now, she must hide from him.

"Just know that if you see me and I have left here, there is danger in approaching me. Be safe," she warns tiredly.

She hears a hum of assent behind her as she begins to drift again.

"Misaki, I have to get out before I fall asleep in the tub," she drawls.

"Of course, your room is ready and waiting."

Ryuishi nods and stands when the hands leave her body, unashamed of her nakedness. She stumbles to the showerhead and rinses off, then dries. She staggers into bed, and is asleep almost before her head smack into the pillow. She's so tired; she doesn't even dream. She'll count it as a blessing.

For once, Ryuishi finally gets to sleep in. Well, not really. It isn't what she would call sleeping in, because that would mean she got up at two in the afternoon, but she does get to sleep past nine o'clock. It's magical. She should do it all the time.

But before she can even begin to think about a meal, she is whisked off once more by the crowd of men and women waiting for her outside her screen door. It takes almost an hour for her metamorphosis to occur this time, and everyone-and she means everyone-is in on it. From bath to wardrobe to make up, she is surrounded by enthusiastic workers. The whole time she has to deal with them making comments on her appearance, both good and bad.

"Your nails, Ryuu-hime! Your wonderful nails! They are all misshapen and cracked!" one woman complains, enthusiastically pushing back her cuticles.

"I think your muscles have gotten even bigger, my lady. I'm certain I could wash clothes on your abdomen," another man replies, looking at the cut of kimono and holding fabric against her skin.

" *Aiyah* ! What is this! Who cut you? I'll make sure their whole family hangs their head in shame for this scar!" a dramatic man tells her, right before rubbing some sort of oil into her shin.

"Such beautiful hair! It's gotten even longer! Soon enough it will reach that pert backside of yours. Why, if I was five years younger-" a woman begins, right before Ryuishi tunes her out for her own sanity.

The list goes on, but all Ryuishi knows is that they get paid enough for each of them to take a few days off, and that she feels like some sort of doll by the end of it. Of course, she looks fucking amazing by the end, as well.

The flowing, beautiful kimono still makes her feel weird though, like she should be with Keiko back in Kiri. Especially because somebody dug up one with great, curling waves on the bottom hem. The color is the off grey-blue that reminds her of days filled with fog so thick she could barely see and the stench of mildew and wild decay. For a second she can almost see the cylindrical buildings tangled in vines, the sidewalks snaking with crack and broken by the gnarled twisting of spruce, bushy trees. Can almost taste the moisture laden air, heavy and sick on her tongue. She sees it all burning, the sky filled with smoke and the clouds raining ash, hears the crackling of flames and the rejoicing of her people.

She blinks, and she is back, standing in front of a mirror. She would brood, but she is devastatingly hungry. Hunger over angst, that's her motto.

"I look awesome, thanks everybody. I'm making Omurice, who wants some?" she announces, and everybody in the room shoots their hands up. Through the Okiya she can hear shouts of 'Me!' and 'Let me help!'.

Ryuishi sweeps towards the kitchens, hair loose and trailing free, her gait determined and steady. She reaches for the apron by the door without looking, ties it tight, and sets to work making enough rice omelettes and sliced fruit for a small army.

Misaki slides in with a wink, and get to work making an equally large amount of tea.

"Ah, does the Okaa-sama often work in the kitchens?" Ryuishi teases, beating the eggs.

"Probably not as often as the gracious lady cooks for her people," she states, bumping her hip against Ryuishi's own. The teenager almost starts at how... *friendly* it is. The key word is almost, and she instead focuses on whipping the shit out of the eggs.

"Ah. Well, my people have to eat. They probably worked their asses off last night," she returns.

"Yah, there was some ass stuff," somebody pipes in from the doorway. Ryuishi promptly chokes on air before laughing, loud and free.

There's a sound of a playful smack and Misaki scolding someone. She shakes her head and turns to prepare the rice, setting to prep the rest of the meal.

Brunch is a busy affair, with a table full of people, and more workers dropping by just to swipe some food before leaving to go elsewhere.

She is halfway through her second omelette when she hears the baffling shout of "INCOMING!" and sees peoples smiles turn fond, or

exasperated. After that she can hear a distant bellowing, far off but coming closer.

"NeeeeeeeeeeeeEEEEEEEE-" somebody shrieks. She has a moment to register the sound of little feet on wood, drop her utensils, and scoot back from the table. No need for a mess. "-EEEEEEEEEE-SAN!" Naruto wails, flinging himself forward. She takes a second to appreciate just exactly how far the boy can leap before she is smacked down by twenty three kilos of exuberant jinchuuriki.

"Hey baby bro, how ya been?" she asks, laughingly.

"Nee-san! Garbage fairy nee-chan! You were gone forever, dattebayo! Misaki-nee said you would be back, but I thought maybe that the other fairies might have beat you up and taken your magic bag!" he gushes. "And then you had to go on a quest to get back your bag, with a ninja, because ninja are cool. The two of you also met Odayaki Oni, because he's the best, and then the three of you went to Fairy Court, and it turns out the evil king *took* your bag, and so you had a big fight, but you won, and now you're Fairy Queen!" he finishes, taking a big gulp of air.

Ryuishi stares for a moment, shocked by the imagination on the child. She looks out of the corner of her eyes for any shamefaced individual who was going around telling him crazy shit while she was gone. One or two of the workers seem inordinately interested in their tea. She looks back, blank-faced to the beaming features of the child, who has somehow crawled halfway on top of her lap while she was looking away.

"Am I right?" he asks, blue eyes wide and demanding.

"That is exactly what happened," she relents, unable to withstand the intense look of longing on his face. He crows in delight, his arms wrapped around her neck, his cheek smashed against hers.

She notices for the first time that his clothes seem to be of a nicer quality than when they last met up. His white shirt with the red spiral

is the same, or course, but it looks new and fits his growing frame better. The only difference is that he seems to somehow acquired baggy black pants with a plethora of pockets. They look very familiar.

Like, the same pants she wore last night but smaller, sort of familiar.

Well, considering cargo pants are widely produced and worn, it would be a huge stretch to use it as evidence of a connection, but still. Gaara hadn't changed his wardrobe.

Then again, Gaara was practically royalty as the Kazekage's son and was probably dressed by other people. Shit.

"My nee-san is the Fairy Queen! I knew it!" he shouts to the world.

"Yah, yah. Sunshine, I love you to death, but let me eat," she tells him, pressing a quick kiss to the cheek he has pressed against her face. Honestly, it's so easy to adore this child. She bets that if she tried to kiss Gaara, his sand would grind her lips off. Still, she shouldn't compare the two, it's not fair.

For a second he looks like he wants to cry, and she isn't sure if it's because she hasn't told him she loves him before, or because she wants him to move. Either way his face lights up like a supernova.

"I love nee-san too!" he exclaims, shifting around to sit on her legs facing the table, arms outstretched towards her omelette. What a mysterious child.

"I want some too! Then nee-san has to make Ramen! OH! OR SATAY! No one else knew how to, and it's so meaty! What if you put the satay in the ramen?" he babbles on. Ryuishi smacks his hand out of the way and pick her chopsticks back up.

"Maybe I'll teach you how to cook it so you can feed yourself when I'm gone, you dork," she teases. She picks up some of the omelette and holds it in front of him to take a bite. It's okay to feed him first.

The others look on and see the bronze-skinned woman smiling softly, feeding the exuberant child on her lap, unperturbed by their stations in life. They see the meal she has made them, the scorned and disrespected, and they see stars. Misaki swears that there is a divine backlight around the pair, haloing them in a soft golden glow.

This is their Lady, they think. The one who provides and sees, the one who was born just the same as them, the daughter of a whore. The one who climbed until she was far above them, and when she could have left them behind, the one who came back and lifted them as well. She saw them, knew them, and she loved them. Her actions, docile and seemingly normal, made their hearts burn.

Their loyalty is hers.

Ryuishi blinks under the bright sun. The humidity of Fire Country is something that never fails to remind her of her home back on Earth.

She still misses it, and she knows the ache will never leave. Her family, her customs, her culture, they are a foreign concept to the people here. There are similarities here and there, like the way some of the peddlers and traders remind her of her aunts and uncles. But their faces are always a little too pale, their eyes not quite dark enough, and their unfailing concept of things like 'honor' and 'valor' are so strange and rigid.

One might think that, being a drug dealer, she had come from a broken home. It may be true in some sense, but the honest part of it was that being a dealer brought in cash that her family desperately needed, while also allowing her to be there for them. Sure it was shady, but it meant that she didn't have to spend most of her week getting paid minimum wage without benefits, getting treated like shit by customers or bosses.

The grass is lush under her bare feet, popping up between her toes. The thick calluses on the pads of her feet mean she can probably walk all over without shoes, like she used to.

"Nee-san?" Naruto queries. She hums and looks down to her side, where the rambunctious little boy is holding her hand.

"Yes, Sunshine?" she answers.

"Why do you look sad sometimes?" he asks. The question floors her in its bluntness. Does she look sad sometimes? Why did nobody tell her before?

"I don't... I don't know?" she answers honestly. The boy takes it upon himself to explain.

"You look around, but it's like you aren't seeing stuff with your eyes. Like you're far away or something. Then you make a face, like this-" and here he lets his eyelids droop halfway, his little lips parting a tiny bit, and focuses on nothing for a second. The expression is drained and empty.

"You just look... sad," he finishes, fixing his features back to normal.

Ryuishi hesitates for a second, a lie working its way up. Something like an excuse or a joke, but she swallows it. She doesn't know why.

"I..." she starts, looking around the Okiya gardens, "I have had a... I miss many things, Naruto," she tells him.

"I used to have a lot of things. Like a house, and a family, but something happened and I'm not sure I can get to them anymore. I'm trying, but it's kinda... well, it's hard. when I was really... sad, some friends saved me. They helped me be happy again, but now I can't reach them either," she says. "Sometimes I think about them, and all the things I had, and all the things I want, but it's very complicated. I'm trying to make new friends, but it isn't easy. I can't seem to find what I lost."

"If you lost stuff, the old man says ninja can help you!" Naruto tells her in an attempt to help. It's true, he's seen the missions. Somehow

they always manage to find him anyway. He bets they can find her house, even if it is in the Fairy World!

Nee-san looks at him, and for a moment he is unsure. There's a look in her eyes that makes him uneasy. It's deep and dark and scary. He doesn't like it.

She kneels down next to him, and her long straight black hair smells familiar and safe, but she doesn't feel like it. She feels like she's serious and like maybe he said something dumb. He hopes he didn't.

"Sunshine, what is it you think shinobi do?" she asks, and he brightens. That's easy.

"Shinobi help people! They beat up bad guys and save princesses and do cool jutsu!" he explains.

He looks at her, and he is reminded of the time nee-san told him to run in the marketplace, the time when he was afraid. He had looked back at her then, and she had looked so different, standing out like she didn't belong with all the people around her. He doesn't think he'll ever forget that.

"Naruto, ninja are... complicated. It's not easy, and it's not always about helping people," she says, and she looks like she's far away again, looking at him but not.

"Shinobi and kunoichi, they... Sometimes a fight never ends, Naruto, and sometimes it's not against bad guys. It's not so black and white. Nothing is," she says softly. "The life of a ninja is hard to define, because ninja are people, just like you and me. They have a job, and they do it, like a baker or a shop owner. Only, once you're in, it never stops, not until you run away or die. Shinobi and kunoichi are always on duty, always ready if they need to be. There is death in their lives, Naruto, so much death. They kill people. They watch their friends die-whole squads, sometimes. They keep going, everybody for their own reasons. And sometimes they forget their reasons, and they

forget that they're people, and they just... live, like ghosts. Ninja aren't good, Naruto, and they aren't bad."

"Nee-san," he whispers. Her hand is cool around his, but nobody...

He always thought that ninja were like superheroes. People liked them, and they were strong, and they did cool stuff. He never thought that they would have to... to watch...

His determination burns inside him.

"I'm gonna be a ninja." he tells her, and she looks at him like he's talking funny. "Imma be the best ninja ever, I'll be Hokage, and I won't let my friends die! I will help people, and then I'll help you find the stuff you lost!" he proclaims. He feels it in his heart, he knows it to be true.

Nee-san stands up, and she smiles at him like she knows a secret, but a sad secret. Her hand reaches up, and she ruffles his hair.

"Okay Sunshine, I believe you," she says. "Now come on, before Misaki-nee starts worrying about us getting lost in this huge ass garden."

"Yah!" he exclaims, going to hold her hand again. The day is hot, and the sun makes everything pretty. He looks up at nee-san, and he still has so many questions, but he likes just being with her right now.

He doesn't care if she really believes him or not. He'll make her believe. He'll become the best there is, the most awesome Hokage ever, and then, he'll help her find the things she lost. Maybe then she won't look so sad sometimes.

AN: So, this is plot. Naruto still wants to become a ninja, a great ninja, only his motives have changed a bit. Also, Ryuishi is solidifying loyalty and delegating responsibilities. Things are happening, slowly. We also get to see some other stuff. Let me

say though, the next chapter? A huge monster of a thing. Enormous. dude, it's too big. Send help. I also wrote like, a five page piece for 'Songs gone Unsung' about Ryuishi's dad. WHOO BOY. Just wait till that bombshell gets edited.

Also, guess who got pegged in the fore head in a roman candle fight? Me. It was me.

Thank you to every reader, favoriter, and follower. Bless the reviewers, who feed my creativity and keep me strong. I also want to take the time to thank those who gave me fanart, I don't say it enough. I love you. ALL OF YOU.

I especially love my beta enbi, who is on vacation and DID THIS ON THEIR PHONE. MUCH WOW. SO AMAZE.

Question: What do you think the Rookie Nine (and Team Guy) will think of Ryuishi should they meet? OR Who would you like to see Ryuishi fight? OR How do Ryuishi and the various Akatsuki interact?

Meeting The Forest of Death

I do not own Naruto. Or Zelda. Side note, I have no idea how age works. TW for Gore and past trauma.

Ryuishi stretches out on the unfamiliar bed, her long, tan legs sliding easily against the tacky shuriken-patterned sheets. The bed beneath her isn't as nice as the one she owns, but it's a step up from the futon she spent a week sleeping on in the Okiya. Meaning, it's much better than a cushion on the floor with a fucking weird wooden block for a pillow. It's probably a good thing she spent all those years learning how to deal with that shit back in Kiri, now that she thinks about it. Learning the ins and outs of the culture of escorts was more useful than anything she could have asked for.

The old Okiya wasn't of the highest quality, the kind of establishment that trained people for entertaining nobles, but neither was it a shack full of too many drugs and worn-looking women. They taught a little bit of class there, just a tiny, tiny bit. It's where she learned to walk in the ridiculously layered kimono and stupid ass high, slanted zori. She learned how to pour tea just right, and say fanciful fucking nonsense that sounded pleasing to the ear. She could speak like a lady, and act like one of those really awesome and perfect housewives. It also taught her how to pick a john, if she ever needed to. One that wouldn't beat the shit out of her or get violent. It taught her how to calm those dickheads that got too rowdy, and how to force a pretty, pretty smile onto her face even though she would have torn the teeth right out some of those leering asshole's faces.

(Actually, she might have learned that one in high school. It was nice to know how to do it in this weird, culturally-meshed world, though.)

She hums out the notes to the Song of Storms, her eyes darting over the pages of the Icha-Icha book. She's already read it, and even if it's not great, there is some pretty awesome prose inside of it.

Still, she'd kill a fucker with a candy wrapper for a gaming system and a television. They have the latter, if you have connections or lots of cash to blow, but they aren't really popular and also, really shit quality. The movies are okay, though. The spread of technology is fucking weird. She misses the convenience of internet, and telephones... and video games, board games, mass manufacturing, bulk product, easy to install electric lighting, cars, planes... shit. The things she would do for a klondike bar would horrify and traumatize the masses. She doesn't even fucking *like* klondike bars. But ice cream and chocolate are specialty items, and she misses the chemical taste of things from her old world.

Ryuishi continues her song, mouth barely open to vocalize better. The acoustics of the room are great, even if the traps make it a bitch and a half to get into. She is so stuck in the book and her own thoughts she doesn't hear the front door slide open and then close again.

The grim-faced Hatake Kakashi, however, takes one look at the pack neatly settled innocuously near the corner of his couch and the spread of files on his table and promptly clenches his jaw. Did she even know how much paperwork her disappearance caused? His hand had cramped halfway through and he *still* had to finish it.

How does she keep getting in his house anyway? How did nobody notice her getting in? His alarms should have been triggered. He should have had some sort of warning his day was going to be ruined other than extra items and strangely comforting humming.

He takes a moment to wonder why she sings so much, and why it sounds so nice. Half the songs aren't even in actual words. None that he knows anyway, but judging how they rhyme and how they still sound well made, he can only guess that the manic woman made up her own language. A strange one, full of syllables and sounds he didn't know could be made outside of feverish babbling. The whole language is mad, just like her.

Kakashi sucks it up, remembers the plans he and the Hokage discussed and continues onward. He has a mission. He always completes his missions for the benefit of Konoha and its people. He's taken mortal wounds for his country, he can expose himself to an unstable teenager for it. Or so he thinks, until he makes his way to his bedroom and enters it, following the lulling sound.

He wants to just slump in defeat, because he is sure this is not in any training manual. What does one do when a missing nin has sprawled out over their bed wearing stupid, ridiculously tiny shorts, long hair trailing loosely over their body and...

"Is that my shirt?" he asks, appalled. The woman in question jerks minutely, and he congratulates himself for sneaking up on her. *Finally* .

"Mother fuck-!" she starts, whipping her novel away from her face, only to take in his purposefully non-threatening stance and breath out a sigh of relief. "Oh. You're home," she finishes, placing her hand over her chest as if to calm a racing heart.

He stares at the fabric drooping around her. He isn't that much bigger than her, but the way she has it on make her look ridiculous, like a child playing dress-up.

She follows his gaze curiously, her face lighting up in understanding when she sees the fabric. "Oh! Yah! Um, I used to steal my unit's shirts all the time because their big and comfortable so, I mean, since we're-" Companions? Acquaintances? "-friends, I thought it would be cool," she explains, squirming a bit. "I mean, that's what they do, right? Steal each others clothes and crash at each others places..." she finishes uncertainly. She bites her lip and looks out the window overhead.

Kakashi isn't certain what normal friends do, but he thinks people may get ideas if they find out a younger woman wears his clothes and waits for him on his bed while reading-admittedly, very good in his opinion-literotica. He's certain of it. Maybe he can omit this from

the report? No, it could be an important detail for the psyche eval. Dammit. Nobody can ever tell the Toad Sage, *ever* .

(Somewhere, a white-haired shinobi pauses in his stroll. How long has it been since he's seen Sakumo's brat? A while, right? Didn't he just make jounin, or was that a few years ago? Maybe he should send the kid a letter. Bet he's a hit with the ladies by now. Or men. Jiraiya doesn't judge.)

"Er... right?" she asks again, and this time he sees the uncertainty written out on her face. He takes a moment to remember where he's seen it before and is cast back to the morning after her flashback. She's embarrassed, possibly ashamed, her slanted coal eyes wide and searching, and her nails nervously digging into her palms.

"It's... fine," he relents, even though it's really not. She searches his face some more before accepting his words, even though it looks like she suspects something else.

"Okay," she breathes, shifting her bare legs closer to herself. He wonders if she's uncomfortable, because she keeps scanning the room as if suspecting an ambush.

The silence in the room is heavy and stilted. Do either of them have any idea what they're doing?

"Um... I brought some more files. One might be irrelevant, though. There was a leak in your system, and I took care of it for you," she says. He stiffens. The fact that she stopped one leak just meant that it was either of no more use to her, or was dangerous to her own information.

"Took care of it?" he asks, his tone even and calm after years of practice.

"Oh yeah, she's like, super fucking dead. The facts are all in the files, and I have *some* remains to confirm identity, if you want. The scroll is in my pack. The buyers are also scattered now, or dead, but some of

them were worth some cash, so I hope you don't mind if I sold them," she answers nonchalantly.

Ignoring the fact that she admitted to a ruthless and premeditated murder, which is nothing surprising, (aside from the fact that apparently she didn't even leave a whole corpse to recover) this is big news. Even if it was for her own benefit, she took the initiative to eliminate a threat to Fire Country. The Hokage will be ecstatic to know his plan is showing signs of fruition even after such a small amount of time.

"Thank you," he says, and he is surprised to find he might actually mean it.

She flips her hand around, the sleeves of his shirt swaying loosely around her arm. "Nah, it was nothing. I was doing some stuff in the area anyway," she waves off, but he notes the pleased look in her dark eyes. Responsive to praise. Perhaps he should treat her like one of his summons? She seems to respond well to food and attention, and even if he hasn't attempted discipline, it could work. Maybe he could burn her energy out with some exercise? Speaking of-

"I found a place to train that won't compromise your identity, or require sparring," he informs her. She twitches, and he can see her features slump and melt into something wary.

"Yah?" she asks cautiously, and he knows she is defensive, "I'm not really in the mood to be isolated and then ambushed, so forgive me if I decline."

So untrusting, he thinks.

"The only thing that would ambush would be the wildlife, or me if you agreed to a training exercise," he answers. The pleasant expression is gone from her face, and she looks calculating.

"It's named Training Ground Forty-Four," he says, and something sparks in her eyes before suddenly being smothered out. "Most people call it The Forest of Death, though," he tells her.

"Well, that sounds homey," she drawls, her eyes wandering back to the book in her hands.

"It's open, and full of hiding areas," he reassures, not mentioning the sealed gates, "Plenty of places to disengage."

It's an attempt to assuage any worries she might have, and being a missing-nin on the run, that's a lot. It's also a good way to gauge her skills, but not without giving away some of his. From the look on her face, she knows this. She might even know the training grounds. They *are* somewhat infamous.

"You know I still have check-in dates, right?" she asks, and he nods at the subtle threat. The very reason she is being brought into the fold is a threat against them. An embargo on trade and anger amongst the populace is what nobody wants. Her death or disappearance could spark wars.

He wonders if she ever thinks about it when she engages in risky behavior.

"Is this even a friend thing?" she asks suddenly, "Or is it blatant information gathering?"

He pauses and fights back a reaction. Does she know? Or is she just being distrustful of him? Has she figured everything out, or is this just a blunt question? He has to be careful.

"I know many shinobi and kunoichi who train together to strengthen bonds," he answers slowly, "And they say facing an hardship together forms long-lasting friendship."

"Who's they? Who actually fucking says that?"

He doesn't actually know. If he were a lesser man, he would be sweating.

She rolls her eyes in the silence and flops down on his bed, covering her face with the book. He hears a sigh, and he questions why she is so very dramatic.

"Fine, whatever. Let's go to your horrible horror movie woods and bond with nature or some shit. Maybe I die when I get ambushed by a billion creepy masked motherfuckers, or maybe I get strangled by an errant vine. Either way, I won't have to face the consequences," she relents.

She needs to keep up with her training anyway. Orochimaru will know if she hasn't. She's already taken the weeks she spent with Naruto and Gaara off. So what if it's in a infamously horrible forest full of weird shit? That could describe the streets of Kiri, and she'd come out of them relatively alright.

Besides, it's THE Forest of Death. She's curious, and beside the overwhelming need to meddle in things, she is driven by her curiosity. Like an itch she can't scratch, the need to push things and gamble on uncertain outcomes is second nature for her. She's pretty certain she can handle some woods. Even if she can't, she doesn't believe Hatake would be so stupid as to let her die.

She's keeping his shirt for later, though. It's super comfy. He can think of it as payment for putting up with this nonsense.

The next day Ryuishi looks up, and up, and up, and up. The treetops are so high they block out the morning sun, and already she regrets waking up early and sneaking around the village. Admittedly, it was pretty funny when Hatake thought he had lost her, but then...

Ryuishi looks down where her handler seems to have doubled. A stoic-faced, brown-haired boy is watching her with intensely crazy eyes.

She slides her gaze over to the silver-haired nin, who is showing no reaction at all the the straggler he seems to have picked up. "Hey," she starts, "Remember that thing I said about an ambush?"

"Yes," Kakashi says simply. A moment of silence reigns supreme and a light breeze sweeps between them all.

"Why... Why did you pick up your teammate?" she tries again.

"I didn't," Kakashi tells her. He shifts in place, his single grey eye turning to look at the blank-faced boy glaring at her.

The boy in question, and honestly, he can't be much older than her, or younger-they might even be the same age. As always, she sucks with these sort of things-glares at her. She has a feeling that if he could rip her soul from her body with his eyeballs alone, he totally would.

"How did you know who I was?" he demands, and seriously, that boy has the mark of the crazy on him.

"You smell like resin," she explains to him, "and also, you need new sandals because the one on your left foot has a tear in the heel that was there last time I was here."

Both of these are lies. She actually knows him because of a previous life of foreign comic books, and maybe she looked at his ass a little. Ryuishi doesn't forget a good butt.

The boy accepts it as truth, though, even if she does get a side eye from Hatake. Tenzo... Yamato? Whoever he is, he looks stricken for a second for having given away his identity, which is pretty funny.

"What is he even doing here?" she asks, this time turning to Hatake. He shrugs, and they both look back to him for information.

"I'm-" Tenzo says, stalling for a moment. The reason he was here is because no Konoha operative should take on a mission alone. Not

when they had backup, and not with *that* woman. When he asked his senpai why she was in the village, he was told it was classified information. When he had informed the Hokage of his senpai's strange behavior, the old man had smiled and told him he was aware of what was happening, as it was an important mission.

He didn't ask to be let in on that information, or the mission, all he asked was if senpai had to do it alone. He had been given the affirmative to support his captain as long as his captain allowed it. So when he had sensed his chakra signature looking for something, he had prepared himself to investigate. Now, here they were.

"Spit it out already," the she-demon hisses.

"I'm chaperoning," he states. He isn't sure if it is true.

He hears the smack of his senpai's palm against his face and he knows he is cradling his eyes in his hands.

The deceptively normal-looking woman sends him an incredulous look, her brows raised high on her forehead. "What now?" she asks.

The more he thinks about it, the more he is sure of his statement. Obviously this missing-nin is running a seduction mission. Her shirt, if it could be called that, exposed her stomach and navel, and the cut showed a little too much collarbone and the barest hints of cleavage. Her loose pants were sitting far too low on her waist, as well. He recalls the way she lulled them all into a false sense of security with her home cooked meals and her delicious walnut rolls. Truly, she was a formidable infiltration specialist.

He would stand strong, for senpai. He would be the reminder his captain needed.

"I'm sorry, are you in fact, implying what I think you're implying?" she asks again, and this time her incredulous expression has turned into a mask of glee.

Ryuishi whips her head towards Hatake, who looks like he would like the ground to devour him whole. Actually, he looks exasperated, but she can exaggerate if she wants to.

"Hatake," she breathes, a manic grin on her face. She can see him wince. "Which one of us has the virtue that needs protecting?"

"Please, stop," he states flatly, his hand swiping down his face.

"No, no, let him come. This is the best ambush I could ask for," she tells him. It could be a lie, then again, everything she knows about them is probably a lie. Also, it's a bit creative of a lie for a brainwashed child... teenager... man? It's really out there, is what she's trying to say. He could have told her something more believable.

"Don't encourage this," he bites out. She laughs a second before attempting to smother it, and he hates that he doesn't feel more offended.

"No, please, let's all go into the horribly terrifying forest of monsters together. Wood boy can make sure we all have our virtue intact."

Kakashi groans.

"That is, if you had virtue in the first place," she teases. Tenzo turns to her, and his stoic face is something of a marvel. She has no clue how he makes his stupid turtle head plate look so shadowy and grave, but it is mildly impressive.

"Senpai is very virtuous," he assures her, and the fact that he's so fucking serious, but still using the word 'senpai' is killing her. She can't help it. It sounds fucking ridiculous.

"Soooo virtuous," she chokes out, attempting to swallow her laughter. She feels more comfortable trading snide insults with them than she ever has before. What does that say about her?

"Untouched. His honor is intact," she wheezes out again, and the

glare Hatake sends her could melt steel. She has no idea why this is so funny to her.

Without words, the silver-haired nin turns and goes toward the gate, and she begins to finally regain her composure a bit. Instead, the humor turns to excitement as she looks out into the dark forest, thick with trees so tall they touch the sky.

She doesn't really pay attention to whatever complex bullshit he's doing to the gates, only peripherally aware of them the same way she was any other person. Instead, her gaze is locked on the sky-scraping flora around them. She isn't sure if they were old or just the result of chakra, but she knows that if she ever imagined a place that had Ents, it would be this place. It feels old, like, old as balls, and the air is heavy and thick with some sort of aura. It is the unnatural feeling that the fog held in Kirigakure, the sort of sensation of something more than just nature.

She can feel the grin on her face, and she knows she might be a bit manic, but this forest, it feels *alive*. Not in the way the Bijuu chakra felt, malignant and oppressive against her senses, or the way Guy seemed, exuberant and overflowing with purpose. No, the forest feels alive in the same way the ocean and desert feel alive, like it's been there for an eternity, unchanged and forever. As if, for all the human activity that it had seen, it was untouched and unexplored.

Ryuishi follows the dog-nin inside, followed by the Mokuton user, and knows that she should be wary and afraid of her eminent betrayal. Instead, she is in awe.

"Woah," she breathes out, and she hears the gate shut behind them. This place is *amazing*.

The smell of damp, earthy woods fills her nostrils, along with that extra something else. She can already feel the stirrings of life around her, and her heart beats in her chest, solid and sure.

"Okay, I still hate you for waking me up, but this might be worth it," she admits, and Hatake doesn't say a word. He just sends her a glance and leaps with chakra-powered feet into the trees above, followed by his second-in-command.

Ryuishi lets out a loud whoop of joy, not caring if it gives away her position, and scurries after them.

She laughs, and the other two must think that it is strange, because they send her looks as they flit, silent and graceful, through the trees. She doesn't think she'll ever be as good as they are at branch hopping. It gives her a new appreciation for the both of them. How can they just run like that? This isn't the fucking ground. There are branches and shit.

Unbeknownst to her, Kakashi is thinking something similar.

She isn't running in formation, or with them in any sense. Where he and Tenzo are a well oiled machine, honed down and in tune with each other's movements on an instinctual level, she is an outlier. A strangely moving one, at that.

"Watanabe," he asks, keeping his pace, "Are those maneuvers truly necessary?"

He watches her move through the canopy like an acrobat in a circus. She drops from an higher limb to dive forward and catch another branch with her hands, the momentum of the jump swinging her forward. The moment her feet are parallel to her arms, she releases, flowing forward and spinning until her feet connect to another branch, where she lands, crouched, and pushes off again. She's acting like some sort of gymnastic feline, springing, flipping, and weaving through the trees.

"I don't fucking know how they do it in Konoha," she explains joyfully, "But in Kiri, one moves *around* obstacles. I can't fucking run on trees like it's hard-packed earth."

"I suppose they just teach us how to dodge," he retorts, ducking under an errant branch. She laughs, and he has to wonder how many things she is attracting with her noise. Her feet don't make a sound, but her lips certainly do.

"Go ahead, try and hit me," she mocks, right before releasing into an admittedly very well-executed gainer.

Unfortunately, his kohai takes this invitation a little too seriously, and flings a kunai directly at her. Kakashi feels dread, his mind flashing through the consequences. If she gets hurt, she will never trust them again. If she dies, the world will pay for it in chaos and blood.

To his utter relief, she simply flips again, and in a feat of astounding dexterity, avoids the blade by centimeters, her body curving around it. In the second it took to ponder the world's demise, she has stopped her free fall and landed before springing off again. The maneuver used the least amount of chakra possible, barely a hint to stick the landing. She even laughs when she hears the kunai thunk into a tree trunk.

"See? Move with the force of your body to avoid strikes. Keep up now," she teases, darting forward. Does she even know where she's going?

He takes the opportunity to send a lethal glare at his kohai, who looks completely unapologetic.

"She asked for it, captain," he explains.

Kakashi laments his choices in life before following after. It's a good thing she isn't very fast.

There are a few, blessed moments of silence, before she starts talking again. "Hey, do you think this place has bears?" she asks, still a little too far out to be part of the group. "Because I always wanted to see if I could fight a bear."

"There are many things in training ground forty-four," Tenzo offers, in what most likely is an attempt to get back in his captain's good graces.

"So probably? God, your training grounds are so crazy," she says, and her grin is manic.

"Surely Kiri has something similar?" he asks, probing.

He sees her shrug out of the corner of his eye right before she lands on her hands and drags her legs between her arms, her feet never touching down. Still little to no chakra.

"I don't really know. Only ever used one, and then, it was rare," she explains. "I had just graduated when the war started, so I got most my training on missions or the front lines."

He hears a bewildered noise behind him from Tenzo, and Kakashi himself is startled.

"How old were you?" he asks.

"Er, seven when I graduated I, think. Same age for the war," she answers, and he is stunned. Not only did that make her a childhood genius, but it meant she had been taking front-line missions for most of her life. How was she still functioning?

Then Kakashi remembers the scars that line her body, the thin lines of white and thick scores on tan skin. He recalls the screaming night terrors and flashbacks, the mood swings, and reckless behavior.

Is she functioning?

"Where were your parents?" Tenzo asks, and Kakashi wants to smack him. It would be a relevant question, if she had shinobi parents. The only thing was, she told him she was an akasenko before.

"Mom was a whore. I found her crushed under some rubble when I came back on leave. Never knew my dad," she says, and she sounds so detached from it, like it doesn't matter.

He thinks of a child genius who lived through the horrors of war and is left with a broken dependence on teammates who are nowhere to be found. He thinks of a dead parent, found in the remains of what once was a home.

The story sounds intimately familiar.

"WOW," she exclaims, a little forcefully, "You sure know how to ask some seriously depressing questions, wood boy. What next? Are you gonna ask me about the graduation exam?"

"How did it feel kill your classmates?" his stupid, ignorant kohai asks in a monotone voice. He needs to teach the man about sarcasm and rhetorical questions, apparently.

This question seems to wipe out any benevolence the missing-nin might have been feeling. He can feel the immediate spike of her chakra, unnatural and thick with killing intent. He tenses, but keeps moving, his eyes glued to the kunoichi, watching her intently. Behind him, Tenzo moves stiffly, following his lead.

" *Boy*," she drawls, and the intonation sounds serpentine. He can feel his kohai recoil in horror from it. "You don't know *shit*," she bites out. He can see her muscles tensing, and every instinct in his head is telling him that she is dangerous, so dangerous. Even outnumbered and outclassed, she will drag them to hell with her.

She breathes in, and he can see her smooth out her features with little effort. She pointedly turns away from them. "Whatever, fuck you guys. I'm gonna go find a bear," she says over her shoulder, and then she darts off, disappearing rapidly in the gloom.

Kakashi whirls on his squad member as soon as he knows she is out of hearing range. "This mission," he reminds quietly, "is delicate and

in risk of being are jeopardized at any moment. She is an unstable, viciously dangerous missing-nin, and if you ostracize her, it will fail."

Tenzo has reverted back to a stone face, an emotionless mask that Kakashi recognizes as his 'Root' face. This one is only a little bit different from the usual blank expression he has. It is in the tenseness around his eyes and the tightening of his muscles.

"Can you, or can you not, proceed in a manner that will help this mission succeed?" Kakashi asks.

The man looks over, his eyes wide and solemn. "I can proceed, captain. I will not make a mistake again," he promises. Kakashi searches his face for a moment, but accepts the proclamation. Tenzo hasn't let him down before.

The only problem, they find, is that when they try to follow where she went, it turns up that there is no trail to follow. No scent, even though Kakashi knows she wears perfume and scented products, no traces of broken branches, no chakra. Like a ghost, she has disappeared. He thinks back to the way she moved, how it disturbed nothing, moved nothing out of the way. How she channeled so little chakra when she leapt and ducked.

Instinctual, he thinks. She has done it so much it has become ingrained.

Which is a problem, because this is the Forest of Death and he needs to find her before she kills herself doing something stupid, like wrestling a bear. The longer they wait, the more could go wrong.

He is on the verge of something like panic after half an hour of searching for clues. Not actual panic because he has faced worse. His concern, ah yes, that's the word, melts away with a sudden, violent chakra flare to the east. They race towards it without a thought, even though it is more than three kilometers away.

The scene they find isn't the one they thought they were going to find, though. At this point, Kakashi wonders why he set expectations for her in the first place. He doesn't think she's ever going to be confined by them.

"Those aren't bears," his partner decides to say. It's neutral, and nothing if not true, because they certainly aren't bears.

They watch in fascination as the missing-nin, in a fit of insanity, dances her way out of the way of an overly large feline creature's swipe, sliding through the slick mud.

It dawns on Kakashi that the chakra flare hadn't been a distress signal, rather the natural spike that occurs when one uses ninjutsu. Judging by the newly moistened and slicked terrain, a Suiton-based one. Which is startling, because there is no water source, which means she converted it. It takes a large amount of chakra, or precise control, to convert chakra into an actual element from scratch. If he ever entertained ideas of her retaining a chuunin rank after defection, they are blown away now.

One of the wagon-sized creatures roars at her, and they watch in morbid curiosity as she bellows back at it and swings her leg up to kick its fore-paw. He thinks he's only ever seen such a bold move from Guy before.

It connects, and there is a sharp cracking sound. The creature cries out in pain and crumples forward, sending out a wave of mud. She leaps over it, landing on the prone creature's back, where she proceeds to watch the other creatures while simultaneously stomping her leg thigh-deep through its vulnerable eye and into its brain. And though he is a war-hardened shinobi used to death, he thinks that might be a little excessive.

"How many of you are there?" she asks as they prowl around her, "What? Like twelve, maybe?"

There are far more than twelve.

One of them strikes from behind, lunging at her. She drops without looking, rolling down the still twitching remains of the first beast. Two more take this time to swipe and bite at her, but she miraculously dodges them as well.

She slides back up into a nimble, low stance that he doesn't recognize, skipping down the rump of the dead creature to land in the mud.

"This is just like the D-ranks they used to give us, only you are a lot bigger," she tells them, and Kakashi takes the time to wonder exactly what kind of D-ranks Kiri hands out.

He figures that as informative as spectating is, they should really get down there before she gets mauled to death. He can spot two other corpses, and she hasn't drawn her weapon, but so many would be a struggle even for him.

He jumps to her down from the tree, but instead of accepting a presence to guard, like any good Konoha Ninja would, she whirls immediately, throwing a right hook. He barely has time to catch it, and his palm protests the action. It is only years of training with a taijutsu master that save him from the following elbow, knee, and heabutt, all aimed to his face and throat. *Kiri*, he thinks, *not Konoha*. No teams, not for a long time.

"Watanabe!" he calls out.

The woman in question appears to finally take note of who he is, and pauses in her assault. She blinks in recognition. He thinks it is over before he notices the way her eyes widen and she sinks down low. He follows on instinct.

Overhead, a wooden plank burst into life and slams into the leaping feline's ribs, knocking it back.

"Talk later, important stuff to do," she tells him, tearing her fist out of his grasp and reaching up her pant leg.

For a horrible second, he thinks that she is just going to rip away her pants. It fits, it seems like a thing she would do. Thankfully, that is not what she does. Instead, she tugs on something, and a blade drops into her hand. Beyond all logical belief, she pulls a long meteor hammer from her pant leg. He is stunned at how he never noticed. There is no way she fit that many meters of solid metal links inside her pants without anybody noticing, let alone the half a meter blades.

What follows is madness. It's painfully obvious that Watanabe hasn't worked with a team in years, or been indoctrinated with any proper squadron. Her fluid, dance-like steps are the only thing that stops her from colliding with him and Tenzo several times, and the fact that the two of them are capable shinobi in their own right are the only thing that stops them from being impaled on the end of her weapon more than once.

As it is, she sweeps a hail of kunai aimed for the beasts out of the air and sends the blades back at them, on reaction alone. It gives three of the beasts an opening to converge on her, and in a desperate gamble, he sends a Katon: Goukakyuu at the pile the exact moment she uses the other end to leave a gash on the torso of one. It makes them retreat, but he also hears her curse as she retrieves the heated metal with a complicated movement of her leg.

Another instance is when Tenzo uses his Mokuton to skewer one of the felines, which she conveniently decides would make a good mount, jerking both gigantic cat and woman into the air. It sends her flying right back at the wood user, and they crumple into a heap. It would be adorable, the two of them tangled in a ball of limbs and spattered with mud and animal body fluid, if not for the fact that they were surrounded.

Turns out, his kohai is a solid place to plant her hands and she saves them both when she drives her feet into the jaw of an oncoming beast. He can see the strength in the strike, not only from the way the monster staggers back, but from the ominous creaking sound that comes from Tenzo's ribs and the rush of breath that leaves his mouth.

They barely make it out of there without serious injury, thanks to the way the missing-nin battles without regard for the other shinobi. As it stands, they wind up exhausted and bruised, the sun dipping down fast. Kakashi knows they won't make it back to the gate before nightfall.

"It's going to be dark soon. We should make camp," he suggests, and the long-haired woman shrugs silently. She hasn't spoken much since the fight ended, or since Tenzo said what he had.

It turns out she doesn't need to speak for him to learn more about her methods, though. She leads them, with an uncanny sense of direction, to a small clearing by a river, and shrugs her bag off her back without a sound. The two other nin watch as she pulls a scroll out and releases a pulse of chakra into it, revealing a metal box and her sleeping roll. The roll she ties up, not in the grass or dirt where it would leave an impression, but between two trees where it acts as both a hammock and tent. She gathers wood and kindling from fallen branches, careful not to pick too much in one area and leave it bare.

She places them into the box, making sure they're structured properly, and sets them aflame. There is not enough light to give away their position, but heat for comfort and cooking.

Later after she has bathed, and somehow simultaneously procured fish as well, they eat in total silence. The gloom settles around them, and she looks from above, the glowing embers left from the small fire casting light onto her face.

"I never killed my classmates," she says suddenly.

Kakashi looks up at her words, and even Tenzo looks startled. She breathes in, as if she will find some sort of strength in the air around them.

"I shared a class with Momochi Zabuza. He was... he was my best friend." she tells them, her voice steady. Her eyes are still glued to the orange coals as she speaks, "And one day, right before break,

he didn't show up to the Okiya. When I went to find him, he was standing in a room filled with-" she inhales again, and this time her breath hitches.

"-With tiny little corpses." she finishes.

The silence around them is stifling. Even the forest seems to still, listening to her words.

"We fought. It was hard, and everything was slippery with entrails and every one of them looked at me with horrible, glassy eyes. We fought, and we fought, and I think I hated him. Then, bleeding and hurt, I looked down, and realized I was hating the wrong thing," she says distantly. Her voice is cold, empty and far away, like the taint inside her chakra.

"Zabuza was *nine*," she tells them, "He was just a kid, so was I, and Kiri? Kiri *wanted* us to kill each other. I should have shown him another way. I should have showed him that they were just kids, and that he didn't need to prove anything. Kiri gave me a headband for battling the apprentice of one of the swordsmen into submission. Kiri gave him one for murdering fellow children in cold blood."

She breathes, and this time her face contorts into a twisted mimicry of rage, pulling away from the emptiness from before.

"I don't know what it feels like to kill a classmate," she spits. "What I know is the absolute hatred that comes with knowing that the whole time those classmates were being killed, somebody was watching. The pure loathing that accompanies the fact that none of that had to happen, and that our fucking *teachers were watching us the whole time* ."

Her jaw clenches, and her dark eyes tear away from the box to look Tenzo in the eye. She holds the look for a long while, letting the mokuton user see the righteous anger inside. She turns and those same pools of black meet his lone grey eye, and he sees fury and determination whirling inside them.

"I may have done horrible things, and I will probably continue on to do more, but I never have killed a child," she tells him. "And I hopefully never will."

In the darkness, he hears what she is trying to say, hears the promise in her voice. There is nothing he can say to acknowledge it, nothing he can do but hold her stare.

In that moment, with those words, he learns that he might understand why she turned on her village like she did.

They leave the forest the next morning, and she is back to her jovial, joking self. He doesn't forget, though, and he doubts Tenzo does either. It would be hard to do, because he feels that in that moment, she shared part of herself that she hasn't shown many before. When he discovers that she has disappeared again at the end of the week, he doesn't even groan in exasperation. For some reason, he feels sure that the unstable missing-nin isn't as dishonorable as she seems.

AN: This chapter is big, a stuffed with important stuff. Ryuishi is opening up just the tiniest bit, showing that she is not a deity or almighty missing nin. She's giving away secrets by just being there. Not only is she vulnerable when Kakashi finds her on his bed, but she also gives away some of her fighting methods as well as her traveling methods. Not enough to take her down or corner her, but enough that the opposition gains a footing on ways to detain her. Not only that, but she admits a huge weakness (in her eyes) when she tells them about the massacre. She shows how much it affects her to this day, and how it can be used as an emotional barb. She's hedging her bets, slowly giving them tools to stop her if she goes too far.

I also want to say this chapter was a bitch to write and Maybe a little OOC for some, but in my head, Tenzo just left ROOT and has about as much social grace as a stoned monkey. He's digging for information the only way he knows how, by

destabilizing an opponent. Kakashi, however, is realizing how big of a mess Ryuishi is.

Also, obligatory fight scene with them all. It shows not only her progress in her years away, but how her methods have become sort of merciless. I will take this time to say that Kakashi could still kick her ass though, and so many others as well. She's strong, but not a super shinobi.

I want to thank my readers, my favoriters, and my followers. I also want to say that I hope my reviewers find money on the ground, because you guys keep me going. Every time I read a review I smile, and even if I don't reply, I do read them. Over 2000 reviews, and I have read every word. Bless you guys.

Thank you to my beta Enbi, whose next story I am eagerly awaiting.

Question: If this was a soulmates AU where everyone is born with the first words of their soulmates tattooed on their skin, what words would Ryuishi have on her, who would they belong too, and how would they all react? OR A character of your choice is witness to a rare event, Ryuishi crying. WHO is it and how do they react?

Meeting Sage Advice

I do not own Naruto.

Watanabe Ryuishi, missing nin, Burner of Kiri, the Lucky Dragon, people's princess, founder of the tribe of Mumei, once-upon-a-time member of the Kiri no Kaijuu, and all around person with way too many titles, has developed something of a sixth sense. It started way back, before she even became a shinobi. Hell, it might have started before she was even in this world. In fact, she's kind of sure it did.

When one is raised by a family with a military history as large as hers had, they become trained to notice their surroundings from a young age, even if they never join the force themselves. When one is raised by a family with a military history and a shadier, less known but equally large criminal history, they become even more aware. It's a trait that is almost bred into them.

It should be stated that none of her family from her past life were criminals, per se. They weren't like the mafia or some shit like that, but they had a tendency to do dumb and reckless things from the very beginning, the same way they had tended to gravitate to the more violent, military aspects of life. In fact, they could be the same tendencies appearing in different ways.

Take, for example, her old paternal grandfather, who was a respected soldier who made the rank of sergeant back in World War Two. Clever and capable, he was known for being a good man. A less known fact was that he also had an absolutely incurable case of sticky fingers. So those crates of supplies he might have written off as broken in his reports? Or those machines that, somehow, just didn't work anymore? They were actually discreetly shuffled around for the right price.

How about her great aunt, who had been a guerilla fighter and wonderful mother back in her world? The one that had wonderful baked cakes and a delightful sense of propriety? Well, she was a moonshiner. Ryuishi knew it, her parents knew it, her cousins knew it. Seemed like everybody knew it but the police.

So it really should come as no surprise that her brothers had all become soldiers in the various branches of the military, who at times probably did some extremely shady shit later on, and she became a drug dealer. She herself might have joined up if, you know, every fucking one of her older siblings hadn't done it too. The unbeaten path and all that.

She tried college, honestly, she did. She liked it even, that's where she learned rock climbing, and where she got to try so many new things she didn't get as a kid. The problem is that grant money doesn't last forever, and she didn't come from good money. Military service means little after one leaves the corp, and VA spits on those it's supposed to help more than most would believe. Not only that, but criminal activities aren't as profitable as they would seem. Not really.

One thing she learned through her years? Never, ever get into debt. You won't get back out.

So she lived her life and came back to the town where she was raised, which was probably for the best. Her parents were not capable of much physical movement, and her sister was still young. They needed help, and they needed money. She took care of her parents, and raised her sister like her own. And when they were hard up for cash, yeah, she maybe pushed some drugs. She didn't have her aunt's contacts, her grandfather's opportunities, or even half the backing her brothers had.

The point she is trying to make, with all this rambling, is that she has kind of a sixth sense. Half bred in from generations of avoiding death at the hands of others and avoiding the eyes of authorities, half

trained into her from a childhood spent in a shitty area with paranoid parents.

(A shitty area in both lives. The second one clearly was harder than the first, though.)

Her skill has been honed by the many, many, *many* attempts on her life since she became a shinobi. Ambushes in war, on the battlefield, and being hunted as a criminal by authorities and bounty hunters alike have made her talent into a dependable skill.

So when Ryuishi feels her chest tighten, and the hairs on the back of her neck stand up, she can say with a fair amount of certainty that she is being watched.

It's her hint that she's spent way too long fucking around in the river systems, and it's time to get her ass into gear. Not fast, but twisty and steady, her usual grueling, unrelenting pace.

She goes for a while, working with the current to go faster, not letting whoever it is know she's aware, and then, without pause, she goes to land, and then tree, and then circles up and back to river. She does it three more times.

It's nearing dusk, a day and a half later, when she gets tired of the itching feeling. It's really starting to piss her off. So, thinking that it would be better to just murder them, or otherwise disable them from following, she sets a trap. Or, in this case, she sets up a camp that she usually wouldn't do at this point in her journey.

She doesn't need extra light to do anything. She always worked best in low light, and her eyesight is poor enough that she never relies a hundred percent on it anyway. More like, eh, eighty six percent.

So she listens, and she breathes, hoping to catch a scent or sound, and to her luck, she does. Only, it's not a sound she's expecting.

Someone is vomiting. Sure, it's muffled, and it's faint, but she knows the sound of upchucking. Blame it on her inability to remember that she is horribly lactose intolerant. Whatever the source of her ability to identify the smell and sound of throw-up is, she takes off to the source of it. She leaves the bedroll between two trees and her firebox on the ground, burning hot. The unidentified person isn't far away, and she's quick to find them.

It surprises her, in a distant, faint sort of way, that they are familiar. While they aren't wearing the same mask, and their cloak is a bit off, they are definitely the same child that snuck seaweed onigiri from her at Kakashi's place. The child looks immediately away upon her entry, and she can see the kid tense, but her mind is spinning. Small child. ANBU. Hatake's squad. Won't look at her. Vomit.

Oh beautiful and gracious cosmic powers that be, she's being followed by a tiny Uchiha Itachi. She's unsure whether to fawn over him or shit her pants.

She goes with option three, absolute apathetic bluntness. "Usually they send taller people to hunt me," she states. The tense, capable little murder baby curls away from her, and she feels a little bad. What the hell did she do?

For a moment, she is thrown. This isn't the aloof but capable shinobi that was always shown in the series. Instead, he's a shaken preteen. Well, he's holding together pretty well for a kid that just lost his lunch and chased her nonstop for two days, but still, he's not one-hundred percent super cool genius Uchiha.

"Your Gates," he whispers. "It's inside your Gates."

"The fuck you doing, lookin' at my Eight Gates?" she asks, still unsure.

Honestly, that was a bad thing for him to say. What if she had been somebody like Orochimaru, or Kumo? If she were anyone else, she might not have known he had a doujutsu before he said that,

because only those with special eyeballs can look at the Eight Gates. Generally speaking, one doesn't get to see chakra inside the body.

It dawns on her then. *Oh*, she realizes. *He saw my chakra*.

She looks down at him in pity. "Oh hon," she sighs, "don't look at me with those crazy eyeballs of yours. Turn them off, or whatever you do. It's not something that's meant to be seen." He doesn't respond, and if she had to guess, he's wondering if he messed up and gave himself away. He did, but not in any way someone else would figure out.

She shifts her weight, wanting to comfort him but also not wanting to be stabbed. The only ones who had seen the Void infection completely were Orochimaru, and probably, now that she thinks about it, Hatake. Shouldn't Hatake have put out a warning about it, or did he just assume some other shit?

Sure, some people may have seen tiny bits of it inside her jutsu, but the thing is that the eye kinda slides away from it unless you force it to stay. That's the way Orochimaru described it anyway, and he would know how her jutsu look. In the heat of battle nobody's forcing themselves to look at anything either, and she never heard Kisame or Zabuza breathe a word about it.

The Void is something she likes to forget, and for those who never died, she bets it is doubly so.

She huffs and looks down at the boy, who looks like a drone just holding himself together. How long was he forcing himself to look? The fuck was that kid thinking? He was a child, he had no need to watch that mess, to gaze into the abyss and have it watch him back.

"What are you doing following me, anyways?" is what she ends up asking. It does no good to dwell on the emptiness inside her. The taint on her soul is something she likes to ignore.

He seems to remember his purpose and draws himself back up, still keeping his distance, and the blank mask is presented to her again. His posture seems to stiffen up and empty out of all personality.

"You are-" he begins, but she cuts him off with a wave of her hand.

"It's not for murder, otherwise you wouldn't be talking to me. That means it can wait. You hungry? You must be, you've been following me for like, two fucking days. I have some toiletries you can borrow to get the taste out of your mouth, and then we can eat," she states.

The masked figure doesn't show any expression or any other visible change at all, but she feels like if he could see his eyes, they would be giving her a deadpan expression. Which is fine with her.

Actually, this whole situation is fine with her. This is an opportunity, something to be taken advantage of. She would never have gotten him alone by herself. This is actually huge. Gigantic. If she plays her cards right, she can do so much, change so much. Plots whirl to life in her head, bursting into life like fireworks in the night sky, each one branching out into possibility. She can use this.

It occurs to her that the thought is inherently fucked up. In fact, she might be fucked up. Here she is, faced with a small, soon-to-be broken child, and she wants to use this meeting to her advantage. Jesus H. Christ on a bike, is she ever not thinking of herself first? Does she have any morals at all? What happened to her great Human Rights movement? Wasn't there a clause about not using kids or some shit?

Morally, she's stuck. Does she even have morals at this point, other than she won't murder children?

She stops herself. There's no point in looking deeper. She knows she's selfish, and that she has no right to do this. It's not going to stop her. Her morals and ethics have been loose for too long.

Ryuishi turns slightly and waves him forward. He hesitates, but he steps up, and they walk side by side. Not because they are on equal ground, no, but because neither one trusts the other not to stab their back. For a moment, there is only the sounds of the forest around them. The ambient noises of the late fall cicadas begin in a rhythmic, hypnotic buzz, and there is the whistling of nightingales. The camp looms in the distance.

"You know, you're very skilled to have kept up with me," she starts. "Hatake must be a better teacher than I thought."

His steps barely falter, really, it's hardly noticeable at all. He's very good even at, what? Eleven? She doesn't know. She doesn't remember every detail about him, but that's fine, because she knows enough, and the rest she can gather from context. It doesn't matter that she doesn't recall the exact age he was when he entered ANBU, because she knows that he's there and that means the Uchiha are still strategically placing their clan in the outside ranks. It means that the coup is still on.

Which is a shame, but something she expected. If anything, her own actions will have spurred it on. If Kiri can do it, why not them? Not that many know what happened in Kiri, and the civilians had a much better reason to revolt. Being systematically oppressed and butchered on the streets is much different than losing some political footing or being cast in suspicion, but the privileged don't seem to think much on that.

"Then again, that's not an ANBU mask. So it could be the training you're getting in that... hidden group," she says smoothly. Just hints, just enough to make him question.

The statement is leading. She could be talking about ROOT, or he could even believe she's talking about the Uchiha. It's a vague statement, he can think what he wants.

The firebox is still burning bright, and she shifts the bag off her shoulder. She gestures for him to sit. "I don't have any onigiri this

time, I apologize. I can make up some stew, though. It will be better than the rations you've been eating, I bet," she tells him.

He waits in silence, and she smiles. She knows it probably isn't as soft and warm as she want it to be, but it will do. She can't coddle him, no matter how much she wants to. Lord is it hard, though. He's fucking adorable, all tiny and cute in his black cloak and blank mask.

"You're a growing boy, so I'll make a lot. Then after a bit of rest, you can go back and tell them that I have declined the offer," she tells him, digging into her bag for her food and spices scroll. Okay, maybe she can coddle him a bit. Somebody needs to do it.

"You have not heard it," he answers monotonously.

"Don't care, I have my own shit to do," she answers, unsealing the ingredients. "I'm not part of the village, they can't order me to do jack shit. Especially when they use children."

"I am-"

"No," she says, and this time she looks up from the vegetables. "I know exactly who you are, Itachi-kun, and you are a child." She sees his body movement still, and even the rise and fall of his chest is hard to see. Maybe it's her poor eyesight, though.

She meets the black eye holes of his mask, and she wonders if this is how people feel when they look at her. The darkness is empty and foreboding.

"How?" he demands, his voice sharp and imposing. She smiles again. Such a demanding kid.

"I know many things, Itachi-kun, things I should have no way of knowing," she says pleasantly, her husky voice smooth. "The things I know could bring the whole world to ruin."

He stares, and she returns to prepping the leeks. She looks ominous, he thinks, foreboding and other worldly like something out of a fairytale. Cast in the shadows of the small fire, she looks like some sort of spirit.

"I won't, though," she says, and he listens closer. "I have been through one war, and I have seen ruin. They are not what I desire."

He understands that sentiment. He was young when he saw the tail end of the war. He saw the remnants of what was. He saw the burning corpses pile high, and smelled the thick, cloying smoke of smoldering human remains. He experienced just a bit of that chaos, that needlessly violent struggle that was the battlefield. He finds it hard to imagine what it must have been like to have known nothing but those horrible scenes for all his life, to have spent years on the front lines.

But is she just saying that, or does she mean it?

"To be honest," she begins, pulling a pot from another scroll. How many does she have? "I have no fucking idea what to do with most of what I know."

He watches in stiff silence as she browns the meat, then adds some sort of flour from a small bag alongside spices and aromatics. She is a good cook, he thinks. An odd skill for a woman such as her. A domestic one. A peaceful one, meant to nourish instead of destroy.

"I wonder if I have a right to interfere, to use what I know. I wonder if I know what is right or wrong, if I understand morals or ethics at all," she tells him, and her movements are smooth and sure. She adds the water to the mix, then sliced vegetables, and she looks at him. Her gaze is distant, like she is looking right through him. The shinobi inside him understands that his mission is over. She has declined any invitation given, but the person inside of him says otherwise. It tells him that there are answers here, answers to questions he might not have even asked yet.

"I wonder if I have a purpose here, or if I am here through a random quirk of the universe. I wonder if I have any meaning at all," she says.

Her eyes swim with things he cannot name. He can read people, he can kill them, but things like emotion? They are foreign to him. Not that he does not feel, but more that he does not understand. The coal orbs focus after a moment, and she looks him dead in the eye, like she knows who he is at his core and all that he can be. Like she knows him.

It shakes him, and he knows he will forever remember how she looks in this moment. Even without his Sharingan, her dark, slanted eyes will remain with him, staring at him knowingly. He will never forget the way the soft orange light of the fire illuminates her, causing her horrid scar to stand out like a warning and reminder on her slender neck. The smell of savory stew and the darkness of the forest will haunt him.

"I look at you," she says, her voice soft and low, "and those things cease to matter. All I know is that I want to help."

The amount of conviction inside that statement is staggering. Itachi has met this woman once, and then by proxy. She was afraid and unsure, but she cooked them meals so they could enjoy them. He knows she is a wanted criminal, and he knows her sordid records as the Kiri no Ningyo. He knows that there is something he is missing, because no simple criminal gains such attention from those in charge. Whatever that may be, whatever her reasons, she stood in the land of her enemies, and she made them comfortable. She poured them tea, and she made Hatake-taichou grin, something he had not seen before.

"I might not know how, and I might screw everything up. I might do more harm than good," she says. "But I will try, even if only a little, because you do not deserve what you were given."

He sucks in a breath. How many secrets are bare before her? How much does she know? What is she talking about?

"So, I will offer you something. It's not a great solution, because I'm not that skilled. I don't have that kind of power. When the time comes and you make your choice, know that I cannot stop it."

She breathes out, as if reassuring herself that she is making the right choice. "I can help a little, though. The small ones, the ones who will be too young to remember, I can give them sanctuary away from everybody. I can hide them from every shinobi and every missing-nin, including you and me," she says.

He doesn't know what she's talking about, but it sounds ominous and foreboding. What does she know? How does she know it? No spy would make this offer. No infiltration specialist would sneak in to willingly board with the enemy. He doesn't trust her, not at all. To do so would be foolish. Yet he can not ignore how she said it, how she included that she herself would be unable to reach those hidden.

"If... if you know who I am, then you know I have done it before. If you don't, then I will keep that secret with me."

"How?" he asks. He does not know why, and he does not know what to think, but there is knowledge here, knowledge she is convinced will help him.

"The Land of Iron is a big country, and the shinobi are barred from it save for very special occasions. Traders, however, are not."

He stills completely. He is smart, more than people realize, and the implications of her statement are huge. She could have ties with the samurai... but no, she said they would be hidden from her as well. So it would not be her hiding as a trader, it would be an actual merchant. Which means she has ties with merchants who do business in Iron Country, ties which would convince them to do something that would risk their lives.

Who is she, to hold so much favor?

"I will admit, I will ask something in return," she says, turning to stir the pot. It smells heavenly, and even if he wanted to ignore it, he doesn't think he could.

In all actuality, her wanting something in return eases his disbelief. A deal is much easier to accept than a gift. A trade is no foreign concept to him.

"I will ask that if you do this, or if you don't, you keep it secret. The offer I give is of no detriment to the Land of Fire, or anybody else, and you and I are the only ones who need to know. Nobody else. Not the Kages, not missing-nin, not those who support the tree, and not those who look at it in scorn and hate," she says.

He blinks at her, and she smiles. The stew is almost ready, the sauce-Gravy? Broth?-is almost thick enough.

It's not a light thing she does here, and not an easy thing, but he is a child, and her heart weeps for him. She had a sister, one she would have done anything for, would still do anything for. For her sister, she would have slaughtered the whole world and danced on its ashes. She would have cut her own throat to see her become better than the older siblings that led the way. She would have died with a smile on her face to see her baby girl grow and become a good person, a happy person.

Itachi did that. He fucked up, she knows, but he was a child as well, and children make mistakes. They fuck up. Plans made as a thirteen year old generally don't stand the test of time. He tried, though, and in some ways, he succeeded. He may have irrevocably fucked Sasuke up, but damn if he didn't get what he wanted in the end.

"When the time comes, and all this vague nonsense finally means something, let me know what your choice is," she finishes.

He does not move, and she thinks that he is unnaturally still. What a scary child. Was she like that? God, she hopes not.

She wonders for a moment what it means that she is, in some small way, attempting to manipulate a child for her own greater good. Yes, saving kids is a good thing, but do the means justify the ends? How low will she go? She feels like Albus fucking Dumbledore, only without a fancy wand. Instead she gets murder water bending and six meters of cold, deadly steel chain.

"Until then though, eat and rest, because I can't stick around long," she tells him, and the boy seems to snap out of his eerie stillness and contemplation.

He takes the bowl, and he eats. She suspects that its only because poison has never been her MO, but he doesn't rest, not really. He lays down, sure, and his breathing evens out, yah, but he isn't sleeping. He just lies there in what she would hesitantly call a meditative state, always aware of his surrounds, always aware of her.

She never figures out who sent him, or why he was here, but she suspects that some dumb elder might have ideas about her. Maybe Danzo wanted to get chummy, or drop some threats. Maybe the Hokage wanted to do the same thing, only hidden behind the thin veneer of a grandfatherly persona. Shit, maybe he was sent here to fuck her day up and thought otherwise when his special eyes saw what they did.

Doesn't matter. Ryuishi used the opportunity to her own advantage, as she was wont to do, wondering about butterfly effects and genocide and knowing, the whole time, that the only reason she is still breathing is because he didn't know what she was talking about.

AN: Ryuishi may be wearing the tiniest amounts of plot armor, but remember they are testing her. She's a powerful unknown, and people want to know how to use that. Speaking of using,

she's having some moral dilemmas that will crop again. Nothing huge, but definitely something that would be apparent and will crop up again. Without Kisame and Zabuza to draw a line, and with her only influences being who want to use her for one reason or another, our Grey area Ryuishi begins to slide a bit. Which is to say it's late and I'm most likely explaining this poorly. Also, pre-massacre Itachi is hard as fuck to write. Any other plot holes, feel free to message me.

Thank you to my lurkers, my favoriters, and followers. A big thank you to my reviewers. You guys keep me going strong.

Many blessings on my beta Enbi. Sweet cinnamon bun, too good, too pure for this world.

Question: Three characters (or more) from this fic are now in a random horror movie. What kind of things happen? OR Ryuishi is sick of this political nonsense. She starts her very own 'Fuck you guys have no idea how to raise kid, neither do I, but dammit at least don't make them murders' orphanages. What children does she steal and how does it go down?

Meeting a Test

I do not own Naruto.

In the north-east section of the continent, a woman makes her way steadily up the the side of the mountain. Surrounded by bone-chilling winds, sparse, scraggly trees and jagged boulders, she shivers and wonders if a crop top is the best choice for these temperatures. In the distance, the light of a village burns against the grey sky. Soft smoke gently curls above them, mingling with its heavenly brothers.

The Land of Lightning, she thinks, is both poetically beautiful and offputting as fuck.

It won't matter for much longer, she supposes. She can see Kagami's brothel even with her poor eyesight, a small brown dot nestled snugly into the inclined surface. Half dug into the stone, it stands like a beautiful and inviting beacon. She can't see the tall windows or the beautiful wood beams yet, but she knows when she can, the inside will be warm and inviting, full of brothel workers clad in beautiful colors. She just has to sneak through the town, or go around it and come from behind.

Tired and worn as she is, she decides to take the longer route. Sure it will be cold as fuck, and yes, she's tired, but she doesn't feel like hiding around or sneaking about. It doesn't feel right, not for the moment at least.

It occurs to her that for all the strength training she has done, she has been on stealth missions for years now. She might not even consider frontal assault her specialty anymore. She's great at it, don't get her wrong, but there is something to be said for the infiltration she's been doing as well. For years now, she's been dodging bounty hunters and shinobi in the vast expanses of the Elemental Countries. She's been fostering a substantial number of informants and

suppliers, and stealing secrets left, right, and diagonally. Armed with her foreknowledge, she knew a lot anyway. Now, with her network? She can tell you exactly how the Tea Country's noble second son likes to be tied up, and what he likes to eat in the aftercare of a long bondage session.

Don't get her wrong, she also knows what Tea Country's greatest exports and imports are, and the weak spots in their border, but that came from more of the Mumei travelers than the sex-workers. That shit, while important, isn't as funny to her. She's not judging his kinks, it's just... of all the delicacies, he chooses soba? Just, like, cold boiled buckwheat noodles. No sauce or anything. The fuck is that?

She huffs out a bewildered breath and ponders the state of a noble's palate while she treks down towards the back entrance of the brothel. A beautiful woman in a sultry cheongsam takes a second to scrutinize her, but then she smiles faintly and tips her head forward in a silent greeting. Ryuishi knows that while the woman is stunning, she is also capable of slaying people with a few hand seals. A Yuki guard, one with a now ten-year-old son who has a strange knack for making some pretty splendid beauty products. She has no idea if it was the woman or the boy who first thought of integrating medical herbs into skin creams and hair products, but it doesn't really matter. They work great, and they sell for ridiculous amounts of money. Hell, she even uses their shaving lotion. Her legs are smooth as silk when she finishes.

Ryuishi silently nods back in a respectful greeting, and she enters through the back door. Tomorrow she will meet with Kagami, but for now, she is exhausted. Not as tired as back in Konoha, so she gets a meal in, but she still crashes afterward. She wakes up only once that night, startled to consciousness by a whimsical dream about clouded seas that turned into a nightmare about broken bodies and limbless corpses blown apart by vicious Fuuton techniques. She gets back to bed after some mild disorientation, but she wakes up refreshed and

can barely recall the details of it when she gets up somewhere around eleven.

Her body is still covered by travel dust and mud, so she she spends some time in the communal baths laughing with some of the workers before grabbing a quick, nutritious breakfast of berries and granola still in her bathrobe.

Ryuishi takes special care when dressing, though, making sure her eyeliner is fierce and straight, making her almond shaped eyes predatory. She stains her lips a perfect plum, and she picks out her freshest pair of pants and shirt, taking care to avoid stains. It is as much as giving nothing for her old matron to pick at as it is for reaffirming her place in the older woman's eyes. She never really wanted to be the kind of person that made others wary, but Kagami, bless her heart, is tricky and its best to keep up appearances.

So Ryuishi keeps herself clean and oozes lethal grace. She's very glad she did, once she opens the door to Kagami's meeting room on the top floor, because it would appear they are not alone.

For whatever reason, Orochimaru is there as well, drinking tea (Goddammit man, that is her fuckin' tea blend!) and sitting in the most effortlessly perfect seiza she has seen. Kagami sits off to the side, seemingly calm. Ryuishi knows it is the forced calm learned from a long career as a long-term seduction agent.

The open, airy room is quiet as she walks in, keeping her stride purposeful and composed. Her eyes, however, rarely stray from the cloak draped around his shoulder. Crimson clouds play over heavy, jet-black fabric. *It's only a piece of clothing*, she tries to convince herself. But it isn't. It's a brand, the mark of an organization that took one of her boys. It's a threat she's going to stomp out like a beetle beneath her heel. Looking at it fills her with such bitterness she tastes bile on the back of her tongue.

She breathes in, steady and smooth, and tells herself that it's just a hoodie that's trying too hard. The humor of it makes her feel better.

She mentally thanks whichever part of her head makes stupid comparisons.

Remember Zabuzza, she reminds herself, sweet, monstrous Zabuzza. There is hope yet.

She sinks down across the table from Orochimaru and plasters a smile on her face.

"What a pleasant surprise," she drawls, "Didn't expect to see you here."

The man hums low in the back of his throat, and it sounds like sandpaper being dragged slowly across wood. Not unpleasant, but vaguely inhuman.

"I did inform you I would check the results of your training," he rasps quietly.

Ryuishi smothers a grimace. Fuck. She didn't want to spar today. Shit. "Oh, is that all?" she asks. "Of course. After my business is done, we can get down to it."

"There is also another matter I wish to discuss."

Ryuishi draws a soft breath and meets his unblinking golden eyes. They're actually quite pretty, in her opinion. Sure, they're intimidating as fuck, but so were the sharp teeth native to many Kirigakure inhabitants, and she hears her own visage is pretty fierce at times. Looks aside, his words cause her no small amount of curiosity. To her knowledge, it isn't easy getting away from Akatsuki business, and while she doesn't trust him, she does have faith that he isn't here on that. He'd be screwing himself pretty hard if he was selling her out.

If it was just more plans for the Sound, or any advice for the Mumei, he'd send it by summon, so that can't be it either. Medication would be monitored the same way.

She waits in silence for him to speak.

"It has come to my attention that you have recently turned seventeen," he says stoically.

Ryuishi blinks. What?

"Yes," she answers. She sure did. She spent it hiking through the wilderness alone, like most of her birthdays in this world. Which is actually a pretty depressing thought. She can't remember the last time she had a birthday party.

"It has also been brought to light that, at this age, in your current health, you would be capable and fit enough to bear a child," he continues.

Ryuishi blanches and the blood drains out of her face. What wild, whimsical turn is this? What the hell is this conversation? What the fuck is happening? A quick glance at Kagami shows her the Okiya Mother knows just about as much as she does.

"Your blood tests show you are fertile, and I understand you have a... fondness for children. You have also displayed interest in both genders and sexual relat-"

"Oh my *god* !" she hisses. "What is happening?"

Orochimaru blinks, like it is the most obvious thing in the world. It isn't.

"How do you know this?" she bites out. He continues on like he doesn't hear her.

"That, combined with the observations of you regularly seeking out the attentions of a jounin of Konohagakure during a consistent period of time each month-"

She drowns him out. There is horror inside her skull. Blatant, disgusted horror.

It doesn't take long for her to connect the dots. By this time, little baby Kabuto should be a plant inside The Land of Fire, and an informant to the snake man. He would recognize her even under disguise, and she has been seen gallivanting around with Hatake. They act chummy, sure, but he's her friend. Or her handler, whatever you want to call it.

"-Discussed previous interest in obtaining such an asset, as well as professing undisclosed plans for the Anbu agent. Intelligence gathered from the surrounding area-"

Neighbors, she thinks hysterically, *just call them neighbors*.

"-Report odd noises in the night and amicable behavior between you two as well as several outings that could be classified as-"

Ryuishi buries her face in her hands. She knows it's flushed. So much for composure. She can feel Kagami's eyes burning into her skull.

Konoha thinks she's boning Hatake. *Orochimaru* thinks she's boning Hatake.

"-You have also displayed interest in the clans, and while I applaud your efforts to obtain data and your choice in breeding stock, you are not trained in the arts of seduction-"

A strangled noise leaves her mouth. The worst part is that it might kind of look like that if you squint hard enough. She didn't ask for this. She didn't want this. She just wanted a friend for Buddha's sake. Why can't men and women just be friends and stop there? What is it with people?

"-Poor timing if you choose to carry on the bloodline through-"

" *Stop*," she whines. She's never going to be able to look anybody in the eye ever again. Dear lord in heaven above, sweet Odin on a tricycle in the middle of a San Francisco street.

"Please," she wheezes, embarrassment flooding her. Her whole body feels unnaturally warm, and the tips of her ears are burning. She thought there was going to be a fierce discussion of politics, or economics, not this. Never in her wildest dreams did she imagine this.

Orochimaru pauses and takes in her appearance. She bends further and tries to collect all her limbs inside her own body and implode out of existence.

"I'm not..." She can't even say it. It hurts to think about.

"I'm not trying to get... He and I are-" She whimpers. "I don't-"

"I'm not knocked up," she finally chokes out in a desperate whisper.

"Have you checked?" Kagami snipes, and oh lord, for a second she feels four all over again. Kagami hasn't spoken in that tone with her since she joined the Academy.

"I haven't even-" she whispers, flushed, "I haven't had sex," she tells the palm of her hands.

As her eyes are covered, she never sees the other two in the room relax a little, like a weight has been taken off their minds.

"Why would you even think that I...?" she asks.

Orochimaru blinks slowly. It eases his mind to know that as reckless as the woman was, she was not idiotic. He knows that most members of society feel the need to have intimate relations at some point or another, and that at her age, his teammates had been more than interested in the subject. He personally has never been struck with the desire, but after Kabuto's report, he felt there might be a need to have this conversation. As old as she professed to be mentally, it was his understanding that she was merely seventeen in body. Not only that, but she expressed no shame in her body or her sexual nature, and had been raised surrounded by those

in an inherently sexual career. Previous data gathered suggests that this may lead to a more open lifestyle about such a subject.

Combined with her affectionate and matronly attitude toward children, he had been duly concerned when she had begun looking a little too hard at some figures. When she had expressed such interest in Hatake, who he had heard from others was an objectively attractive choice, he began to observe. What he had found painted a strange picture. A picture that pointed toward a certain frame of interest.

He was unconcerned that she actually would be swayed to loyalty by the man. Her interests and efforts already lay with her teammates and their own plans, and all her work had been placed in such areas. However, recreational activities can lead to accidents. That is a fact, and statistics will prove it. While he approves she at least chose a strong bloodline should it occur, there was far too much going on for her to care for an infant. Things would become very difficult for them if she was out of commission for nine months and constantly distracted for years to come. He estimates her productivity would be cut back at least sixty percent.

Not that he wouldn't like to examine any offspring she should choose to have one day, but now was not the time.

"All circumstantial evidence gathered pointed toward an intimate relationship. While this could be a guise, it is best to communicate clearly that this would be a disadvantageous event should it occur."

He sees her shoulders shake and she takes a shuddering breath.

"I am not romantically interested in anybody at this point in time," she clarifies, her voice embarrassingly high, "Should I partake in intercourse, please feel secure that I will proceed with full knowledge of contraceptives and sexually transmitted diseases. This talk is over."

Then with the combined effort of every piece and part inside her head, she attempts to bury this whole conversation in the very deepest parts of her brain.

It takes her a few seconds to blot the memory out from her consciousness thought, and when she is done, her cheeks are still burning bright. But she powers through, and finally removes her hands from her face, looking at Kagami. Her coal eyes are trained on the woman's forehead, because Ryuishi is certain she can't meet her gaze.

"Have the traders agreed to the advice?" she asks, and damn, her voice is still high.

Nobody acknowledges the sudden and blatant change of topic. Thankfully, with tact and grace, they move on.

"Of course. They will gather in River near the border in twelve days. They are nervous, though. Not many caravans take this route," the matron states.

"Just keep them thinking about long term profits instead of instant gratification. Over time, they will gather a steady and loyal clientele. How was the fall crop yield in Grass and Rice?" she queries, still attempting to wrangle her blushing cheeks. Damn them. Damn them both.

"Diverse. Allowing for the fallow fields cut down the number of crops planted, but the rotation allowed for more variety. The natural pesticides and the traps you taught cut down on stock lost to vermin. Overall there was an extremely satisfying yield. You will see a small percentage on the caravan going to Suna."

Ryuishi nods, finally setting into a rhythm. She will be among that caravan. Not as the Rakki Ryuu or the Kiri no Ningyo of course, but rather as the tag-along candy merchant from The Land of Rivers. It will solidify her place as invaluable, bringing in more traders to the country, and will essentially put her in their good graces. It will also

allow her to observe the traders up close, hopefully giving insight to how they work.

She turns to see Orochimaru, who is watching them both with keen eyes. It doesn't matter that he is listening. Names are not spoken, and the traders fall under her domain rather than his. Speaking of his domain...

"How have the negotiations with Rice's daimyo been going?" she questions, reaching out for an empty cup. Wordlessly, Kagami pours her some of the tea. She still doesn't know how to feel, but she's gaining ground.

"Smoothly," he hums. "He is beginning to see the tactical advantage of having a Hidden Village. It was not entirely easy to convince him but some... unfortunate losses accompanied by the projected increase of trade are swaying his opinion."

Ryuishi bites back a frown. She doesn't exactly approve of the insinuation he is making. 'Unfortunate losses' sounds a little too much like 'choreographed sabotage.'

"Those losses were...?" she asks leadingly.

"A tragic accident among the guards caused by some wayward missing nin. It has, of course, been rectified, but the court was understandably shaken," he rasps.

Does it make a bad person that she feels better that it was guards? They were just doing their job, but their job was the sword. Those who live by the sword, die by the sword. One day, she will probably die by it too.

It strikes her that her morals are fading bit by bit. In the past, this would have been a tragedy to her, the purposeful extermination of life in order to further a cause. In some ways it still revolts her, but the self loathing is muted and distant for now.

When did I get here? she asks herself. *Who thought this was a good idea?* Ryuishi is probably the last person who should be here, discussing trade and takeover. She was a drug dealer, not a fucking law student or politician.

She forces it out of her mind and gets back on track, listening as they discuss events that could have disastrous results. Later, she will find it endlessly funny that talk that started out so embarrassing ended up so serious.

When business has wrapped up in Kumo, Ryuishi gets a traveling companion in the form of the world's creepiest Sannin. He's not staying with her forever, but he cannot properly observe her skills in Kumo without drawing attention to the Okiya. So they set out for a more neutral territory: the Land of Hot Water. The upside is that there are hot springs dotting the country. The downside is they don't stop to utilize them.

Orochimaru keeps pace with her easily, and she can feel his appraising gaze on her almost constantly as they travel. It makes her nervous, because she knows the assessment began the moment she walked into the Okiya. He tested her awareness, her ability to react to unknown situations, her ability to improvise and misdirect without suspicion, and her ability to control situations. Save for the first, she's fairly certain she aced these tests. The coming (or ongoing, if you want to get technical) test will be her physical aptitude. Right now, he's gauging her endurance, if the way he's been changing the speed of travel and how they haven't stopped yet is anything to go by.

While she is fitter than she has ever been, she holds no illusions that she will ever beat Orochimaru. It's just not possible. She's still surprised she survived those hunter-nin. Then again, hunter-nin are like all ANBU, their ranks made of jounin, chuunin, and genin alike. Military police.

Orochimaru is not. He's so hardcore they had to make up a rank to give him: Sannin. The best she can hope for is to maybe, *maybe* reach his ridiculously lofty goal of 'acceptable'.

After a few more hours, he holds up his hand in a fist, signaling for her to stop. The area he has chosen, she is displeased to note, has no open bodies of water. It's simply high grass and sparse tree sprinkled with the occasional boulder. It's foothill terrain, which makes sense because they just left the mountains.

Still, the fact that he doesn't have to test her near water speaks of his confidence in her skill in it. One unspoken test passed.

The slender, serpentine man moves silently through the high grass. The tall blades part for him as if trying to avoid his touch. She waits for him to find his spot, tension building in every nerve.

He finds an area in the open, where any ambushes will be negated, which removes another plan of attack from her arsenal.

Gold eyes land on her, and he stills himself to give out the rules she will follow. This is a military matter, he knows best.

"You will have three hours," he informs her, pulling a small box out of his pocket, "To retrieve this. During this time I expect you to display your progress in Taijutsu, Bukijutsu, Ninjutsu, and Genjutsu."

She takes a moment to eye the box. It looks like... like a pastry shop box. She can even see the little stamp that marks it as a red bean paste bun. How long has that been in his pocket? They've been traveling for days. It's not like she wouldn't eat it, don't get her wrong, it's just... how much do people think she likes food?

"In an effort to motivate you further," he hisses, capturing her attention again, "I will reward you if I deem you adequate."

With what? she wonders. *A stale bun?*

He eyes her coldly like he can read her thoughts. God, she hopes he can't.

"I have compiled a comprehensive reports on people you have interest in," he says, "Take the box from me, and you will receive my observations of your old teammates."

Ryuishi straightens, her eyes locking on to him. If she wasn't motivated before, she sure as hell is now. Orochimaru has shinobi contacts in almost every country, a fact which means he has easier access to information on other shinobi. Water Country was the one area her Mumei would not return, and now, now he is dangling the information in front of her like a promise. He works with Kisame, and has gathered data on Zabuza.

She wants it. She would kill for it. She will kill for it if she has to. The man smirks, and she wipes anything from her mind but the desire to have those reports. They can't be very big, but she doesn't care. An errant photograph, an update of their diet, their last mission. She would do horrible things for those files.

She feels her gut churn and her mouth go dry like desert sand. She planned on putting on a good show, she did, but now she is going to try everything and anything to get to him. Her hand is already patting down her pant leg, working her meteor hammer free.

"You may begin," he states.

Ryuishi, who would have normally attempted to flee or trick her way into success, yanks her weapon free. She knows she cannot keep it long distance with him, a ninjutsu specialist. She needs to prevent him from forming seals, and she needs to hit hard.

Links of chain circle her knuckles, the blades dangling a few inches below her hands. She takes a deep breath, and darts toward him. He doesn't even move.

She starts with a feint, and then an elbow, a knee, another elbow, a leg, a fist, a leg, an elbow. She strings together strikes faster than she ever has, each one packed with a truly punishing amount of power. Orochimaru dodges and weaves around them, watching her with cold eyes, the box somewhere in his pockets.

He watches, and then he moves.

His hands dart out, his thumbs tucked against his palms and his open hand darting fingers first. She sweeps her head neck out of the way, and the strike streams past her throat. Lifting her arm she bats it aside, opening up his right side. Her leg rises, he foot shifting to better distribute the weight, but before it connect with his ribs, he swings the deflected arm around and slaps the strike away.

The area stings, but she uses the momentum to spin, the dangling blades of her weapon whipping around and coming dangerously close to his hip for a hopeful second, but he leaps up and over them, his legs tucked tight to his body.

It a heartbeat, those legs explode outward, level with her head. She drops like a stone in water, and rolls beneath and behind him as he falls back to earth, popping back up at the last second. Her leg lifts, aiming for blow between his shoulder blades, but he twists and catches her strike in one of his pale hands. He yanks upward, and she is pulled away from the ground by her ankle.

Her back bends, and her head rises like a snake, her fingers threading through seals.

Pressure builds, and all she can think is, *faster, faster, there's so many fucking seals. You've trained for this, you've done this. Do it faster.*

"Suiton: Suiryuudan no jutsu!"

Orochimaru takes a single second to identify the jutsu, which is stupidly impressive. The moment he recognizes the seal sequence,

he flings her away like week old garbage.

It's too late, and even though it took her longer than she hoped, it's still faster than she has done before.

Water explodes out of her mouth the moment she completes the last seal, but she can feel the amount of chakra it takes for her to convert the attack without a lake or ocean to leech off of. She compartmentalizes, carefully keeping the woven thread holding the jutsu together inside her head, using as little chakra as possible, exerting her control.

It spews out of her throat as she flies backward, and the fluid twists and churns. It coalesces into a barrel thick serpentine form, the head finally taking shape. A giant maw gapes out and rushes towards the Sannin, who seems pleasantly surprised by her ability to use this jutsu without a source.

It doesn't last, and faster than her eyes can follow he is slipping through hand signs of his own. There is a rasp of, "Doton: Doryuheki."

A wall of earth rises from the ground. It's impressively high, and Ryuishi knows her jutsu has no chance of making it through at this speed. She could, admittedly, attempt to maneuver it, but that is still ridiculously hard for her.

The water dragon ends up slamming against the earthen wall. It lasts only a little longer, the shear force of it carving out a few feet of stone, but most of it ends up sliding down and forming a good sized pond.

She lands, disappointed, her feet sliding and digging troughs in the dirt, her chains already uncoiling from her fists as she spins her meteor hammer to life. She's not gonna lose this, not with what's at stake.

Orochimaru bats another strike away from him, then another, and dodges the last. He would have deflected that one as well, had it not been the bladed end of her weapon.

He is pleased his motivation has brought such fruition. The woman child he has prompted is coming at him relentlessly, and her killing intent is thick and heavy in the air. Even an hour into the exercise she is as fierce and as violent as when they first began.

He is pleased with her ruthlessness. Somewhere during the forty-five minute mark she implemented the Mizu Bunshin jutsu, using the water from the remains of the her adjusted water dragon.

What a pleasant surprise that had been. The ability to directly convert chakra into an element spoke highly of her affinity, and her dedication. It may not have been the most impressive in size or strength, but it had come solely from her own body, not an adjacent body of water.

He observes her with calculating eyes as she pushes his space, forcing him to give the smallest amount of ground. Her taijutsu form is strange, but capable, and her skill with her weapon is not to be ignored. She has come respectably close to actually giving lasting injury with it.

As it stands, they were both surprised when she landed a punishing kick to his solar plexus ten minutes ago. He can still feel the ache of it even now. It was a powerful blow, even if retaliation had come swiftly in the form of a Raiton Palm Strike to her back.

She stands, bruised and yet not yet broken. An acceptable performance, even if he is holding back. This is a test, after all. It would not do to seriously injure her before a long mission.

A clone darts by, heckling him with feints and snarls. He lashes out calmly with, his index and middle finger catching it in the jugular. It releases a hiss and collapses into a pool, but another dances over its remains, flinging a handful of dirt at his face.

He covers his eyes, and notes that she is as honorless as ever. Four times she had attempted to strike between his legs, five times she has pulled his hair, and that was the seventh time she tried to blind him with dust. It is understandable, acceptable even. She fights as she always has, dirty and full of cheap tricks, taking advantage of every opening.

He flings a handful of kunai at the clone, and even though it dodges the first three, the fourth and fifth land on target and it too bursts into a spray of water.

In the distance he sees four more. While the Mizu bunshin is not a chakra intensive technique, he is still satisfied with the proficiency of which she uses the jutsu. Creating them may not take much, but controlling so many can strain the yin-form chakra.

Orochimaru's eyes flow over the tall field of grass, noting the position of each clone, but his eyes eventually come to rest on the still form of the original, whose hands are sliding through a chain of seals. For a moment he plans on correcting her amateurish mistake of presenting a target while using ninjutsu, but it flies from his mind the moment he meets her coal black eyes.

The world melts away.

The most difficult aspect of genjutsu is not escaping. Orochimaru knows this. The most complicated facet is recognizing that you are trapped in one. The caster quite literally takes control of the chakra system inside the brain and manipulates it to their will. The whole body is convinced that what they are seeing and experiencing is reality, and the victim reacts accordingly.

Orochimaru is well versed in genjutsu, but for a single moment he is convinced that this chaotic environment is where he really is. The largest reason for this is because of all the genjutsu he has been placed under, none of them have forced him to feel quite so much.

It is not physical, but rather, emotional and mental trauma. The world around him is painted in shadow and dim light. Torches on the wall cast menacing shadows. His skin feels cold, like frost has settled over his body, and when he looks around, there is nothing but death. Small bodies lie broken on the ground, in the seats, bent over tables, and strewn across walls. The air is ripe with the stench of viscera and stagnant blood, accented by the sharp tang of bile and fear. All of this does not compare to the way his body is reacting to the scene.

He is wracked with an overwhelming amount of emotion. It is hard to pull his thoughts together, because it feels like there is a tumor inside his trachea, obstructing air and preventing speech. His chest physically aches with how something like sorrow and regret, but more than that, there is something foreign to him, something like guilt. The sharp stab of betrayal lingers in his head and there is a pressure behind his eyes he cannot name. This school full of dead children makes him *hurt* .

His body has never felt this before, his mind has never comprehended such a staggering amount of... *emotion*, all at once.

Then, in an experience that will shadow his step and linger in his mind for years to come, he *falls* .

The world of corpses slides away, and nothing takes its place. The absence of everything is creeping and spreads like spilled ink, sliding over whatever remains. It is incomprehensible, this emptiness, this Void. There is no stimuli, no sight, sound, taste, smell, or feel. There is only the Void that stretches on forever and more, till the end of space and time. It is everything Orochimaru has ever loathed. It is the end of growth, of progress, of life. It is the cessation of the heart, the slow staggering halt of thought.

He sucks in a breath, and his chakra, warm and alive, flares it like a beacon and burns away the emptiness, driving it back. The scene slides and drips away, like dew drops slipping from a leaf. Waist high

grass and sparse trees fill his sight, and he narrowly misses the oncoming body hurling itself at him.

He lashes out with deadly intent, knowing that only seconds must have passed, but those seconds gave rise to an opening which his- *dead, the girl truly died* -long-haired companion- *anomaly, scientific impossibility* -has taken advantage of.

She is furious in her desire, driven by his reward, and he has lost sight of the original during the genjutsu. A clone bursts and liquid rains down while something pulls his head back by his loose hair. Another lunges into his side while the final one aims a fist for his chest. The amount of stimulus after the nothing is shocking, but he is a Sannin. He crushed armies and wiped battlefields clean. This is nothing.

He drops his weight low and twists, rapidly lashing out with a chakra coated hand. There are four more bursts and one pained cry that reverberates through the air.

The body of the woman is hurled away, skidding like a rag doll through the tall grass. Her shoulder is loose and flopping, and he knows that he must have dislocated it with the blow. She is lucky he did not aim for her throat.

Orochimaru collects himself and stands tall and still once more, not a hair out of place or a crease in his robe.

Ryuishi grunts, and he hears a stifled shriek of pain in her throat, but she stands again. The chains of her weapon rattle by her legs, and her shoulder droops unnaturally. Her sleek dark hair is messy and frizzy, and he can see the scrapes and bruises beginning beneath her skin.

She looks messy and beaten, but in her good arm lifts, and in her palm there is a small white box stamped with the symbol for red bean bun.

He smiles, and if one looks closely, they may have see the barest hint of pride in the small upturn of lips.

AN:I'm proud of this chapter. So. Here are some things. Things like Orochimaru not understanding basic human social needs, and misinterpreting the situation. Honestly, I feel like, if he could steal genetics in that way, he would totally seduce you and run away when he got pregnant. To him, it's totally a viable way to collect data, Ryuishi just wasn't timing it right and didn't have the correct training. Kagami was just like,'shit, it's Keiko all over again.' Ryuishi, meanwhile, tries to not die of embarrassment and wonders how to explain the term 'queerplatonic'. Also, minor economic shit!

Meanwhile, Ryuishi's genjutsu revealed! In canon, genjutsu can make you feel things like pain and torment because the caster hijacks the brain and puppets it. Generally speaking, if your brain thinks some shits going down, it's hard to know otherwise. The reason we see Ryuishi being good at genjutsu is not only the void, but overwhelming emotion as well. She takes the tangible, physical feelings that she knows and forces them on people, makes them sympathize and react to the scenes. Ryuishi fights by giving people the feels. That's why Kisame knew exactly who the people in his genjutsu were.

Thanks to all my readers, favoriters, and followers. Bless my reviewers who keep me so fucking happy, swear to god. I eat them up.

A whole chorus of angels for my beta Enbi, who shines bright. May they always get free stuff.

On a personal note, I'm losing a bit of steam. Not much, but, like, ehhhhhhh. Ehhhhh. Might, perhaps, maybe slow down a bit. Also, new fanart! AHHHHHHH!

Question:What the hell do you guys think is holding up Kisame and Zabuza, and what are their thoughts on Ryuishi? OR Somebody is going through Ryuishi's pack and discovers her secret stash of adult materials. Who are they,What kink nonsense do they find and how do they react?

Meeting The Caravan

I do not own Naruto.

After Orochimaru sets her shoulder, they split ways. He disappears into the horizon looking like he has just finished up a pleasant business lunch instead of a taxing spar.

Ryuishi doesn't even feel envious. All she can feel is the crisp, smooth texture of two thin files in her hands, and all she can hear is the pounding of blood in her ears. That, and the riotous agony that is her joint. She wants to rip them open and read them now, but she knows she has to get home first. She has to be able to read them uninterrupted, in a place where she won't be ambushed.

She never lets go of the files the whole way there. She doesn't stop. Not to eat, not to sleep, barely even to breathe. She keeps thinking of them, over and over again. Her boys. Her beautiful, monstrous, wondrous boys.

She doesn't even stop once she reaches the familiar marshland surrounding her home. She doesn't slow one bit. She breezes through the tangled roots and branches of the saltwater swamp, sweaty and dirty, until she hits white sand beach and an empty home.

The moment she enters her house and sits down, she doesn't get up again for a long time. Not even to bathe.

For as long as she has had her information network, she has lamented the fact that she had no plants in Kiri. No Mumei wanted to return after their exodus, and the traders that sold there were sparse and paranoid. After the Burning of Kiri, even those few shrank in number. Because after the Mumei left, things changed. Word was sparse and information rarely left the Land of Water. She knows the

weight of her sins, she knows how much her actions tore that country apart.

The shinobi and kunoichi of Water were left in the wreckage of their village. Many came back from the front lines to find that they no longer had homes, and for the clans, many no longer had families. Those civilians that did not leave with her were thrown aside and most likely treated even worse than before. Derision, scorn, hate, and fear filled their lives. She cannot imagine what it must have been like.

Actually, she might, because the whole reason Kiri burned is because that attitude was always prevalent toward the civilian populace. They killed workers in the streets, they took their homes, they burned their boats, and played them for sport. They starved them out and worked them to death. They killed the women, the children, and the men for entertainment. The shinobi had no love for the people of Kiri, and neither did the Kage. That aspect didn't change. What changed was that after the Mumei left, Kiri was forced to recognize that they were dependant on a civilian workforce. With the numbers so low, shinobi were most likely delegated to civilian tasks, and only the highest ranking would be given actual missions. They would not have been happy with that, but this is all postulation. There are only a few things she knows for sure.

She knows that hunter-nin have been ignoring borders and have turned into ridiculously overskilled bounty hunters in an effort to stimulate the economy and bring money in.

She knows that traders from the Land of Water have been poking around Wave and going farther into the Land of Rivers in attempts to sell.

She knows that the fleet of fishing ships has increased in number in an effort to substitute lost food stores.

She knows that for about three years, Kirigakure, the Hidden Village itself, went into some sort of blackout mode. When they came out,

they said nothing about what had happened and there was, and still is, a tax for imported goods. There was also a suspicious amount of ninja missing from the force.

Water Country was hit hard by that. Kiri was, in essence, the capitol, and after it fell, people went on because for most civilians, ninja did not intrude on everyday life. They showed up and had fights, ruined fields and houses, then left again. Unless you sought their business, they remained distant. So when a new law from the Water Daimyo came, and goods from outside were taxed, they felt it.

Ryuishi is directly and indirectly responsible for the depression and ongoing crimes in Water Country. She knows this, but doesn't feel incredibly guilty for it. Kiri was treating their citizens like shit before hand. They were raping, pillaging, murdering, destroying, and torturing everyone before. Now they were probably still torturing, probably still murdering, definitely politically pillaging, and definitely overworking everyone, from shinobi to citizen. Kiri remained a shithole, and maybe it was her spite speaking, but she felt nothing for it. She will never go back, and if she left fire and destruction in her wake, so be it. She tried to change things, and her people got out fairly safe. It did not change, and it still surprises her that the other Elemental Nations have not cannibalized that land. The guilt in her heart for her actions and her people's actions weighs only a little in comparison to many other things. The guilt for leaving Kisame and Zabuza in that hell, for instance, dwarfs it like the sun dwarfs the moon in size. It is selfish, she knows, but she has always admitted to having that personality fault.

Ryuishi looks at the files in front of her, and picks one at random. She opens it up, and the breath leaves her lungs a great whoosh of air.

Zabuza is there. Sweet, monstrous Zabuza.

It's a small photograph, no more than a two by three, but he is looking at her and he looks good. Healthy and strong. She can only see from the waist up, and he is wearing hunter-nin garb. His spiky,

sloppy hair is still the same, and his acorn brown eyes are still as sharp and cruel as ever. She wonders how they got him to put a shirt on, let alone a vest. It doesn't matter either way. Kubikiribocho stands tall and proud under wraps on his back, and she is filled with joy that the blade is now his. He looks... He looks-

Her vision blurs. Something wet gathers in the corners of her eyes, and there is something like a lump in her throat. *Sick*, she thinks, desperately scanning the file. She is sick to be so moved by a tiny file. It's obsessive and unhealthy.

Her heart is filled with warmth despite her thoughts. She reads the sparse information of his life, his jump in rank to jounin fills her with glee. She is proud of him, so proud. She feels a little conflicted that he joined the hunter-nin ranks, but as with all things in Kirigakure, there isn't much choice when you are offered a chance. More than that, she doesn't care. He's safe, he's healthy, he's living his life and doing well.

The fact that when she looks at the picture again, she can see a small golden-bronze medallion hanging off the handle of Kubikiribocho plays a large part in this. Hope bolsters in her heart, and her soul sings with joy. Her boy, her precious Zabuzza. He has not forgotten her.

She stares over it for a long while, just memorizing the information, committing it to memory. Orochimaru undersold these pages. She would have done terrible things for these files, and a dislocated shoulder and heavy bruises where the least of the pain she would take for them.

She takes a shuddering breath, and her eyes slide to the next file. The hope in her heart diminishes, and trepidation takes its place.

Kisame.

She is a coward, she thinks. There is nothing in that file that can hurt her more than his abandonment. Yet, her mind spins out possibilities.

What if there was something she missed? What if the file reveals his unwavering hatred for her? *Whatifwhatifwhatif* .

Her heart aches, and she is afraid of what she will find inside those thin pages. A trembling hand reaches out, and she pushes herself onward. Zabuza did not forget her. He is her hope. Remember the good, she thinks, treasure it.

She opens the file, and fresh tears spill out of her eyes.

The picture is older as well, but those small white eyes and sharp teeth are heartbreakingly familiar. He has grown, and looking at his size chart, into a giant. In the photo, most likely taken after he became a jounin, he is wearing a flack jacket, and his katana rests lightly on his back. His blue grey skin is vivid against the off white background, and it sends a pang of longing and petty anger through her heart. He should be here, by her side, not far off donning a cloak of black and red.

The silver chain around his neck and disappearing down his shirt fills her with bittersweet joy. He remembers her as well, though it is most likely not with warmth.

His file tells her nothing she does not already know. His time with the cipher division, the death of his teacher by his own hand. The squad he was tasked with killing. It must have broken him, these mistruths and betrayed loyalties.

She places it back down on the table, beside Zabuza's open dossier.

Ryuishi weeps in silence for a long time, looking at those photographs. The silence of her house is stifling, and the moisture that trails down her cheeks must be unsightly, but it does not matter. Not here, where only the sea and sand will know.

Eventually, she burns the files, so no one can ever find incriminating evidence on them through her. It's one of the hardest things she has ever done, and scattering the ashes into the ocean is even harder.

For all her strength, she cannot bring herself to burn the pictures, and the two of them are placed side by side with the photograph from their younger years, where the three of them cluster together, her smirk standing out in between their fond exasperation. The newer pictures look out at her from above the frame.

Come home, she thinks after bathing and settling in her empty bed, looking at the group of them.

I love you still.

For two days she allows herself to revel in her melancholy. On the third, she takes her time packing her bag and stocking her gear while letting it smolder out. There is no more time for grief. There isn't ever time for grief, save for when she makes time.

(She thinks of her little sister's birthday, January thirtieth, and the little boats she makes to to this day. She thinks of stiff white paper full of words, folded into ships and brought out to sea, where she watches them float away, her face painted with ash and black warpaint.)

When she is clean and fresh, and her supplies are stocked, weapons hidden, she makes for The Land of Rivers, and the caravan gathering there. She pushes her speed steadily, until she reaches the candy store owned by one of the original Mumei from Water country, and she fills every space not already full with gummies, pastes, hard candies, and sweets to sell in Suna. Then, she does something she hasn't done in a long time: she travels like a civilian.

It takes a full day to get toward the meeting point at her pace, and it seems ridiculous to her. It would take a fraction of that time if she were traveling with chakra. It actually freaks her out a little bit that she has become so jaded to the ways of the everyday citizen. This is how normal people do things. Shinobi aren't normal people. She needs to remember that.

The caravan comes into view, parked next to the trickling remains of a river, and it is a thing of beauty. Wagons lead the way, pulled by lean, muscular donkeys. Following behind are wagon-like structures, large boxes of metal she knows act as a substituted cold storage carrier instead of refrigerated freight. Like the earliest refrigerators, the insulated containers are packed with ice to keep the cargo susceptible to rot fresh. The ice that melts over the course of the journey will go to the braying animals.

Actually, looking around, many of these wagons are packed full of water. It drapes of the wooden sides in plastic containers and animal skins. People are just about weighted over with the amount they are carrying. Which is smart-desert travel is nothing to mess around with. She's carrying several identical water-skins herself, deep in her pack. Only one is on her person though, the ease of which she carries it all would be suspicious.

She wanders around a bit, chatting with the traders who seem to be both excited and trepidatious on the last leg of their journey.

"We came from Rice, and the harvest was so good, well, we decided to risk it," an older man tells her. She is fascinated with how long his beard is. His young son nods beside him, eyeing her skeptically.

"But it was fate. So many gathered to take this journey for the first time in years. Suna was the first to be cut off the route after the wars. It was too dangerous and too expensive. Now, with the good haul and the shinobi hired, I can go back. I hope those spiced lizard tongues are as spicy as I remember," he tells her.

"Well, I hope they are too," she demurs with a smile, stepping away.

She becomes a known entity to those around the camp, and more traders gather as each day goes by. She delights and laughs, but the people suffocate her. She has never journeyed with so many, and the noise puts her on her guard. The laughter of many in the night around the campfire sets her on edge, and she has trouble sleeping.

She never realized how quiet it was traveling alone, how isolated she usually lived. Having it forced in her face like this is uncomfortable.

The night before the journey begins, the shinobi show up. Two chūnin and one jōnin, all from Suna. It's a bit overkill for what can't be more than a C-ranked mission.

Is it, though? She can't tell if Kiri screwed up her perception of missions as well. Either way, she is glad. This whole caravan is a many-faceted plan. The incoming goods and trade will bring cash and stock to Suna, stimulating the economy. In return, the caravan will receive exotic goods that have become more expensive due to the distance involved, and the time they have been off the market. Suna may not have a stable agricultural scene, but it does have good sources of tungsten, iron, and copper, not to mention the textile industry. High quality rugs, carpets, robes, and fabrics of all kinds are manufactured and commonplace in the desert, but practically unheard of in place like Rice, Frost, and Lightning, who are on the opposite sides on the continent. Sure, they have linen and fabric, but not so richly dyed or well woven.

Not only that, but the ninja hired are probably so high quality because of the lack of missions Wind Country has seen. The Wind Daimyo pulled a dick move when he gave missions away to other lands and royally screwed his people over. Suna suffered, and so did the whole country who relied on it as a trade post. Now, because this trade is so valuable, they send higher ranking members to ensure the caravan's safety, and receive payment for a mission that comes in. It will give Suna shinobi better public relations and hopefully more missions in the future. PR is fucking ridiculously important.

Not only *that*, but the caravan makes Ryuishi all but untouchable by Suna without revealing her identity. She was a pioneer merchant, and the more she ingratiates herself with these traders, the more her death or disappearance will frighten them. If one looks at it from another perspective, Ryuishi was among some of the first business to return to Suna after the war, and merchants followed her lead in a

tiny trickle. This caravan, however, is the beginning of a stream following her trail, and Wind Country is a thirsty land.

The morning they begin this week and a half long trek-a week and a half! Like, that's a huge amount of time!-she is delighted to learn that she actually knows one of the shinobi. It's the jōnin, and he's the gate guard that always steals her lemon candy. He surprises the ever living shit out of her when she's walking beside one of the wagons. Blame it on the fact that everyone thought five in the morning was a great time to start moving, or the fact that so many people make it hard to sleep. Whatever it is, the stone-faced man suddenly just appears by her fucking side like magic. One moment he's nowhere around, the next-shazzam! He's standing beside her.

Well, not that quick. He appears a few feet away, which is good, but still startling. Not surprising enough to start a flashback though, or trigger some truly facade breaking retaliation, which is a blessing. She still jumps though, and her heart beats in her chest like of one Travis Barker's drums. The gasp she lets out though is nothing short of embarrassing. In an act of uncanny grace, she also stumbles. Hands cause her to bristle, but they are steadying and warm, and there is a presence at her back radiates no killing intent. Every bone in her body is begging for her to break the grip and go for the throat, but she reigns it in.

"Careful," a baritone voice tells her as she regains her footing. Even though she wants to cold cock the man in the face for scaring the piss out of her, she forces a smile on her face. *Civilian*, she thinks. *Not kunoichi. Remember your roots.*

"A-Ah," she manages to get out. "Thank you."

The blank-faced man says nothing, but his hands linger a few moments longer than necessary before they drop back to his sides. For a few moments, silence reigns.

Ryuishi struggles in this atmosphere. The creaking wagon wheels and quiet chatter of the group fill the air, alongside the laughter and

words of others. It's weird, she thinks, so very weird. It's so loud, so full of life where she is used to silence and shadows.

The lack of conversation is also unsettling, almost as unsettling as the way he is keeping by her side, quiet as the fucking grave. What does he want? Why is he here? What the ever living shit is going on?

He glances at her through the corner of his eyes, the same way she is watching him. Their eyes meet, and Ryuishi immediately looks ahead, pretending it never happened. What is this awful awkward atmosphere? Is he... does he want some candy? Why is he looking at her?

"Hyōsuke," the man says suddenly.

The gears inside her mind work furiously. Helpful soldier? What the fuck is that? What the hell is he saying? His face never changes, so she never finds out, and man, she wishes she could keep her features emotionless like that. Imagine the shit she could say, and the reactions she would get for saying it with a straight face.

The man coughs lightly, as if clearing his throat. "My name is Hyōsuke," he clarifies, and some amount of relief fills her. Okay, that makes way more sense.

"It's nice to finally know your name, Hyōsuke-san. I guess I can stop calling you lemon man in my head," she says, and wow, that sounded way too... she doesn't know. Weird. Not her.

He doesn't say anything after that, and the conversation trails off again. The terrain is turning more barren and desert with every step, and she feels like nine more days of this sort of travel is crazy. Even though the hard packed trail will lead them most of the way, she has no idea how some of these carriages will react to the landscape.

"May I call you Risa-san?" he asks out of the blue.

It takes more than a moment to get through that mess in her head. Risa? Where is she? Oh good Lord, that's what's on her fraudulent paperwork, isn't it? She just got so used to being called Aneue or 'Candy lady' that she fucking forgot her own supposed name. Buddha. How many names does she have now?

"If I'm allowed to call you by your name, why shouldn't you be allowed to call me mine?" she asks. He doesn't answer, but there is suddenly a cheery aura around the man, like he just won a prize or something. It's ridiculous.

Nervous, and not wanting to babble, she continues walking in completely awkward silence next to the gate guard for the rest of the day, unaware of the thoughts or motives of the man beside her. For her, it is slow and tortuous.

For Tanaka Hyousuke, however, it is nerve wracking and divine. His palms are sweaty and his mouth is dry, and it is not from the heat of the desert, but rather his companion. When he first met her, he was sure she was a spy rather than a merchant, because no civilian could survive a wound like the one that left a scar around her throat. He had been aggressive when searching her bag, and had tested her wares for poison the first and second times she came around. Nobody knew the foreigner, or her plans. Over the next two years, that would change.

First came the news of her tragic past, of brothers lost in the Third Shinobi War. As a trader who originally hailed from Rice but worked mostly inside River, it was not an uncommon story. The Land of Rivers was often the battleground for the larger nations, due to its location between Water, Wind, and Fire. Rice was the same in the north, places between Fire, Cloud, and Earth. Many farmers died to outside forces and the desperate grab for land between countries, and many more of them were subjected to the attentions of unkind shinobi and kunoichi.

The rumor mill of the Sand village holds a special interest in the sweets dealer, and many of those rumors circulate on what, exactly,

her past is. Hyōsuke doesn't believe that she received her neck wound in defense of her late brothers, or that her brothers were the one to give her the scar. He doesn't know if she was caught in a battlefield, or held for the entertainment of troops.

He also has a hard time believing the girl has children of her own, or has a husband in every city she trades in. He does not think that her scars are from suicide attempts, either.

What Hyōsuke knows is that he has watched the woman grow into herself. He watched her enter those gates full of nervous cheer and free offerings. He saw her integrate herself with the populace with every visit, selling to everyone, never shying away. Not even the scar ridden, scowling shinobi populace seemed to be off limits to her calm and infectious joy. Old and young alike grew to await the coming of the merchant.

Suna is a hard place, full of people who are like the sun. They are constant, and harsh, only ever showing one face. They began long before and will continue long after. She, however, is like the water, the trickling stream who tempers the heat and harshness, and carves out a place slowly for herself.

He likes the way she fidgets beside him, nervously playing with the low riding pants she wears. He likes the way her hair moves in the wind, tickling her collarbone. He enjoys the emotions that play across her face, her plump smiling lips and her furrowed, curious eyes. He wants to know her. Unfortunately, Hyōsuke has never been a conversationalist, so he struggles. He spends the whole day beside her in silence.

The next day, he finds himself listening to her sing softly as she sits on the tail end of a wagon. Traveling must be hard for a civilian, and the lack of conversation must perturb her. He likes her voice, husky and sweet like incense smoke. He never knew she sang. She should do it more often. (He never finds it odd that he is listening on top of the wagon. Eavesdropping is normal in the shinobi world.)

*" I know you, I walked with you once upon a dream,
I know you, that look in your eyes is so familiar a gleam,
And I know that it's true that visions are seldom what they seem.
But if I know you, I know what you'll do
You'll love me at once, the way you did once upon a dream ."*

The song is slow and foreign to him, but the words are in his language, so he understands. The slow, steady rhythm of it is enchanting. He could listen to her all day. So he does. He doesn't know if she knows he listens, though.

Two days after that, he finds her at the camp they make after the women have come back from their bathing rituals. In the desert there is a shared basin and washcloths for this every few days, and she looks disgruntled for some reason. Her skin glows in the soft moonlight and her hair is loose and air drying. The scent of some exotic flower emanates from her, permeating the cold night air. He watches her comb her long, dark hair from the distance. The moment she shivers, he is stepping forward in order to help in anyway he can.

"The dessert is cold at night. I have a blanket if you want," he offers.

Pride races through him. That sounded almost normal.

She jumps at the sound of his voice, though, and a hair brush rockets from her hands. It lands nowhere near him at all. Civilians have poor aim.

He rushes to go get it, berating himself for walking so quietly. Of course she would be startled, a lone woman being approached at night by a man. When he returns, she is clutching her face in her hands, her loose wet hair hanging off to one side.

"I apologize. I did not mean to startle you," he tells her, offering the comb. Is there a difference between a brush and a comb? He will have to ask his sister when he returns. She's a woman. She will know.

"I am like, super sorry for throwing that at you," she returns, a hand peeling away to take the object. He sees a cheek dusted pink, and he finds it endearing. No kunoichi her age would blush like that.

"Also, thanks for offering a blanket. I have my own, I just wanted to dry off before I went to bed," she explains.

He does not answer. What words are supposed to come next? He does not know, so he decides to simply sits in front of her. He will be less intimidating like this, right?

She blinks, and lets the other hand drop away. They watch each other, and Hyōsuke finds he likes her eyes. They are deep and dark, black mirrors that reflect the stars above.

Ryuishi feels deeply uncomfortable for the umteenth time on this trip. She wishes it was over.

"Do you have any hobbies?" he finds himself asking.

"What?" she returns. He assumes that he spoke to lowly. Curse him for befuddling this whole situation.

"Do you have any hobbies?" he asks again.

"Uh," she says, "I like swimming?"

He would like to see her swim. He bets she is a very good swimmer.

Ryuishi fidgets under the blank faced shinobi's unwavering gaze. Dear Quetzalcoatl destroying the Spanish invaders, what does he want?

"I enjoy landscaping," he tells her gravely.

She smiles, unsure. "That's nice?" Someone save her.

For the rest of the night, no one does. Nor does anyone interfere for the rest of the trip. By the time the caravan arrives, tired and dusty, her nerves are frayed. She has no idea what the man wants from her, and it's so awkward. She thought she and Hatake were bad at social stuff. This guy is like a giant ball of not being able to pick up social cues and prolonged eye contact.

When he bids her goodbye and goes to report back in while everyone is going through security, she feels like a weight has been lifted off her shoulders. She sends a prayer of thanks to the heavens above for the relief as she walks toward a hotel. She has faced this trial and overcome.

Ryuishi is rewarded for her patience when wandering around the bazaar the next afternoon. The traders of Wind Country have come out in force, and she has never seen the marketplace so alive. Fresh produce from the huge coolers bring out merchants from every nook and cranny, and her timing is impeccable. The Kazekage has just slipped a little gold-dust into the market, and people are coming out from paydays, ready to spend on exotic wares like tomatoes and leafy greens. A wagon carrying fish from The Land of Rivers is coated in more stone faced haggling women than the seller can keep up with.

Not only that, but some of the glassblowers and artisan weavers are selling more than they have for months in Suna, and somewhere a bearded old man is eating a whole plate of stuffed lizard tongues, finding them just as delicious as he remembers.

"Aneue!" a childish voice calls. She smiles as a growing redheaded boy makes his way to her side, a little overwhelmed by the amount of people. The shadows of ANBU flit overhead, their eyes glued to not only her and the boy, but the lifeblood that has come surging in.

She smiles and ruffles his hair. He clamps onto her leg like a limpet and buries his face in her clothes.

These are her people, she thinks. Whether they know her or not, these traders and farmers, the child at her side. They are hers, and she is proud.

She only wishes there were two familiar swordsmen here with her to share her joy.

AN: Yo! So, we have some of Ryuishi's plots surprisingly, for once, going to plan! We also have Ryuishi acting like a civilian. Also, her wallowing in misery on the updates on the boys. Stuff! Stuff is happening! Stuff will continue to happen!

That being said, I would like to announce that OTRATS will only be updating once a week now. Several things are happening, and it's time this author got off her ass and finally got back to living life. I need to make money. I don't plan on quitting this story, and there are like, five future chapters already written ahead, so hopefully no Hiatus. I am also planning on maybe doing another story on here, and maybe an original work later.

I want to thank my readers. You guys keep me strong. I also want to thank my favoriters and followers, who are hella cool. I mega, SUPER want to thank my reviewers, who inspired me not to give up and keep going. You guys are the reason this story keeps going.

Bless my beta, Enbi, who made this mess of a chapter readable.

Question:What would you guys like to see Ryuishi doing more of, or starting? OR Ryuishi decides it is finally time to get get back on the horse, or in this case, back in the sack. How does our lady go about Getting rid of the mythical, made up, second life v-card?

Meeting Melancholy

I do not own Naruto.

The trade in Suna goes beyond her wildest hopes. Ryuishi's actually a little surprised she still has hopes, after the constant slew of shit she's been through, but then she remembers that she is not as wholly apathetic as she wants to be. Which, in her mind, is both a huge bummer and a blessing. If she can still hope, she can still hurt, but she also has, you know, fucking hope and shit.

To be honest she doesn't really know what to say on that matter. It's one of those brain quirks, where pieces of her tell her how nice hope is and how kind and compassionate it makes her. How it helps her strive toward her implausible, kinda ridiculous goals. Hope is a good thing. But other pieces tell her how tired they are, and jeez, wouldn't it be great if shit just didn't matter?

She doesn't know what to think on the matter, and she's kinda concerned, but mostly unconcerned with her mental state. It's a mess, a hot mess, but at least it's a functioning mess for right now. She'll take what she can get.

Back to the point though, the caravan. There isn't a huge amount of money made for the traveling merchants, even counting the future profits made by the sales of the goods picked up. If anything, it is very, very small. It stands though, that there is no great financial loss, and the traders are open to the idea of further business in interest of long term profits. Diversifying trade partners and all that.

It's a bloody miracle. Not only is her plan a success, but she gets to spend a small amount of time with Gaara. Only a bit though, because he is being directed elsewhere, away from the valuable trade. She feels the familiar regret in her heart. They are drawing him away, she knows this. They are closing avenues and isolating

him, trying to cut off her influence now that she has moved into a position where they cannot kill her. They will test him soon, try his loyalties.

She makes sure to be extra affectionate to spite them. Every hug is a little tighter and lasts a little longer. Her kisses and songs increase around him. She is burrowing herself in his mind, in his heart.

Remember me, she wants to tell him, *remember that there can be good in life*. But all she says is, "Love you, otouto."

He smiles at her, and she feels like a royal piece of shit. She holds him tight anyway.

Ryuishi leaves before the caravan, keeping her own schedule. It is not too odd, because she is such a regular and has shown herself capable. Her false business has made its worth known, and there is no reason to linger. She pushes herself to go to reach Konoha before it she can even stop to take a break, and she is ambushed halfway there. There is no forewarning, no clue, there is only the sudden burst of a woman through the ground, grabbing for her ankles as she moves through Earth Country, planning to sneak into the Land of Fire from the north.

Ryuishi hisses in annoyance as the unnamed woman tries to pull her underground. She doesn't have the patience for these shenanigans.

"Really?" she asks the woman, " *Really ?*"

Ryuishi takes two good, solid kicks to the back during the fight, and a neat little Doton nearly shatters her foot. In the end, though, she winds up wrapped around her opponent, listening to the nameless bounty hunter's gurgling, the desperate attempts to breathe. It occurs to her that she doesn't know this woman, has no clue what her name is or what her life story is. So it seems kinda fucked up that she's just gonna kill her and stash her body.

When the woman's face has turned blue, and she feels the Void slip open just a tiny bit, Ryuishi unwinds her legs from around the corpse's waist and her arms leave the body's neck. She stares at the remains for a bit, and wonders when, exactly, this became the norm. Shit's ridiculous. Why couldn't they just get a meal or get to know each other? Ryuishi would have probably enjoyed playing Uno with this woman. The stranger could have been really cool. Maybe she played an instrument or had a really sharp wit.

Now nobody gets to know this lady, because she's dead.

She shoves the body down the next ravine she comes across, listening to the river far below. It's another person to add to the ever growing list of people she has killed. She tries not to dwell on it as she begins traveling again. She drowns out the need to think on it with a practiced skill.

The seventeen year old creeps through the walls like a wraith, unseen and unheard. Sneaking into villages has become second nature by now.

She stops by a rundown apartment, spies a familiar potted plant in a window, and stares long and hard from the shadows across the street. She wants to run to wherever he is, wants to coddle him after her perceived failure with Gaara.

She holds herself back.

Naruto, for all his willingness and joy, is in the Academy now. She never thought it would be so soon. Wasn't there supposed to be fall and spring semesters? Or did this school go all year round? There was supposed to be more time, for games, for lessons, for laughter. But he will be under heavier surveillance now, surrounded by people who will pick up on details that could have gone unnoticed. Her time with him is being cut short.

It is one thing to regularly interact with Gaara, where the village sees her as a harmless civilian trader. It is another thing entirely to

regularly seek the company of an impressionable jinchuuriki when the village in question knows you to be a criminal kunoichi with a history of manipulation and destruction. She has no doubt the only reason they are keeping her alive is because she is somehow useful to them, and that the consequences of her death are more than they are willing to pay.

If she was seen interacting with Naruto, that would change. Villages have gone to war for less than that. For the holder of the Nine-Tails' loyalty, Konoha would do horrible things. They would panic and lash out. Bloodshed would run rampant, trade be damned.

She has to begin to accept that her wonderful sunshine, her precious little boy, is slowly sliding from her grasp. In order to make sure he is safe, that he is accepted, she has to give ground. She has to be seen in the mold they want her to be seen in. Less direct contact with Misaki and the Mumei in this city. Definitely way less contact with Naruto himself.

Something aches inside her. She has never been good at letting go.

Thoughts churn inside her head as she tries to convince herself it will all work out. She gave him a place away from shinobi influence. She gave him the Misaki and the Mumei to care for him when she can not. They will make sure he is hugged and coddled, they will make him remember that he is not alone. They will make him meals, tuck him in, rustle his hair, and kiss his cheeks.

The black-haired woman bites her lip. She cannot abandon him completely, though. She will come when she can. She will watch from afar, unseen, waiting for opportunities. It's all about the long game now. She has done what she can, but circumstances out of her control are forcing her to keep her distance.

Ryuishi cannot help herself to give into a single urge. She makes sure the area is clear, and that no one is watching the apartment in his absence, before she breaks in. The place is messy, but still fairly clean, and it reeks of him. The scent of ramen broth, dirt, and paint

hangs in the walls and makes her chest hurt, but she enjoys it all the same, committing it to memory. She knew this was coming the day he told her he would be a ninja. She never imagined it would be so hard, so quick.

Ryuishi wants to leave a note, tangible proof she has been here, but she can't. Not without leaving evidence for others to find. It can't be something another would know or understand.

A small comfort, she thinks, a tiny reminder.

She smells the air again, and it comes to her. Food would not last, and her recipes are distinct. Sounds are impossible, and sight is not in the cards as well, nor is touch. Smell is the only thing she can leave behind for now. So she takes out a scroll from her seals, the same small bottle he was enamored with when they first met. The crystalline glass shines, and the perfume is expensive, but she hopes it is well worth it.

A few drops spread across his pillows and sink into his mattress, a few more for the corners of his kitchen and underneath his couch. Just enough to linger a while underneath his own scent. Just enough to be remembered.

She leaves just as unnoticed as she came, the smell of salty broth mingling with pear blossoms in her wake.

It is with a heavy heart and a conflicted mind that she makes her way to the only place open to her. Even then, open is a misleading word. Her welcome is painted with terms and conditions.

Her feet feel like anchors as they cross through alleyways and shadowed streets. Misaki will find a message in her vanity explaining what's going on, and hopefully it will all work out. It still feels like a sucker punch to the tit, though. She will admit she feels kind of raw and depressed. She wants a day off. She wants to go to sleep, even though it's early afternoon.

She drags herself the up the stairs, staring at the cement passing beneath her foot. Its cool, grey surface is smooth, but tiny cracks spread out if one looks closely. *I know that feel, bro*, she tells it inside her head. Idly, she wonders if attempting telepathic communications with the fucking stairs is a sign of insanity. The she realises she doesn't give a fuck.

She walks down a hall, dragging her feet and surrounded with a glum aura. A red door appears at the end of the corridor, a break in color from all the grey and shitty off-white. She lifts her hand and knocks, just for courtesy's sake. She doesn't expect anyone to be home. He never usually is. Maybe she'll just crash on his bed and mope a bit, she certainly deserves it. It's been a hard couple of weeks, what with Orochimaru's test and the files and Gaara. now Naruto. Don't get her wrong, she's glad the trade went well and that she got to see Gaara, but she's still kind of... moody. Ugh, is she gonna start her cycle soon or some shit? What is up with this?

The door opens, and she blinks. *Oh, he is home.*

Ryuishi looks up through her lashes, lower lip jutting and eyes wide. A lone grey eye peers back.

"I am in a horrible mood," she tells him. "Can I have a hug?" She stares at him dolefully.

A hand shoots out and grabs her by the arm, dragging her inside with a squawk. She stumbles for a bit as the door shuts behind her.

"I hate to inform you, but that is not a hug," she grumbles, massaging her arm. It doesn't hurt, but still. He should feel bad. Here she is, coming to a friend for help, and he gets all rough. *Rude.*

"Watanabe, did you just walk through town out of disguise in the middle of the day?" Hatake asks. Already she can hear the strain in his voice.

"It hasn't even been a full minute, get off my tits," she retaliates, scowling.

"You just knocked on my front door. You walked through town, and knocked on my front door, in the middle of the day. In a Hidden Village. In broad daylight," he explains to her, very slowly, as if he thinks she is mentally impaired. He probably does.

She huffs and rolls her eyes, crossing her arms. "I'm not stupid, Hatake. I wasn't seen, and I know the patrol routes-"

" *How do you know the patrol routes?* "

"-so if you could please stop doubting me and quit riding my ass I would be much obliged."

She doesn't need to see through his mask to get the full force of his completely deadpan expression. He isn't amused with her, which is a shame, because she thinks she is very amusing.

"Were you spotted?" he asks finally.

"If I was would I have been able to make it to your door?" she snarks back, and wow, she can practically *feel* the exasperation rolling off of him. Good to know she can make Hatake go from okay to one hundred percent done just by showing her face.

"Whatever," she huffs out. "If you want to be this way, *fine* . I can see when I'm not wanted. I'll go."

Ryuishi is in no mood to play these games. She's tired, she's raw, and she doesn't want to go there. If Hatake wants to act like a prat, more power to him. She doesn't have to stick around for it, though. She whirls, pack still on her back, and makes her way to the window, no real plan in mind. He's still blocking the door. She makes it two steps before instinct screams at her to dodge, and she tucks and rolls. Her bruised back reminds her of her condition with a shooting, burning pain before she pops back up, arms raised in defence.

Hatake stands, arm outstretched to grab her. "Don't," he tells her.

Ryuishi bristles. She doesn't take orders. Not from him, not from anybody. She didn't even know what she was going to do, so how can he tell her to stop? Her eyes slide to the window, then back to Kakashi, who is watching her. A moment of stillness reigns, silent and oppressive.

She lunges, not caring if she has to break the glass to get away. Hatake's being a right dick, and she is so done. She doesn't want to feel shitty, she just got back to feeling okay. Her feet scrabble against wood, chakra being pushed to her soles so she can find purchase. Behind her she can hear him move into action.

She makes it close, so tantalizingly close before a hand clamps around her shoulder, which is weak from the dislocation Orochimaru gave her. Ryuishi chokes down a pained noise. Her leg shoots back to push him away, but he steps inside the blow, his other hand tangling in her bag. He digs in his heels, halting her forward momentum and she just feels so done.

Her foot comes back down, shoulder width apart, and her arms are still outstretched in front of her. At another time she would make a joke about the position they are in, his pelvis pushed against her bottom, his hands holding her in place, but right now his grip fucking hurts and she just wants to leave.

There is a sharp intake of breath behind her as she squirms to get away. "What happened to your back?" he questions sharply.

"Go suck a dick," she grits out. If she can just break away... Maybe if she just lets him dislocate her shoulder again? She can pop it into place later-

Something presses against a bruise none too gently and she keens, a strangely high pitched noise leaving her mouth. Prophets above, that *hurts*. Is he just jamming his thumb in there?

"Son of a bitch, Hatake-" she starts, beginning to twist around. But he doesn't answer, save to slip a hand around a shoulder strap and nimbly undo one of the shoulder straps to her bag, then the other. She didn't even know that was fucking possible. Like, he would have to practically do fucking magic.

With a gentle toss, her heavy bag is off her back. It thumps onto a surprisingly steady couch with a muffled thump. She has a second to absorb the absence of weight on the bruises before he shoves her shirt up.

Kakashi ignores the squirming missing-nin in his hold and examines the ugly, mottled bruise that seems to be her back. Deep blue purple and sickly yellow-green around the edges-he wonders what she was playing at. The contusions are deep, probably to the bone. Thoughts of preventing her escape, in broad daylight for anyone to see, fly out of his head. Was she stupid? Carrying a pack on this?

"You're an idiot," he tells her, wondering what to do. The light from the window illuminates just how far the damage goes. The tattoo crawling down her spine marks the length of it, from the top of her shoulders to the top of her waistline. The black of the design stands out against the mottled navy and maroon.

"Shut up, Hatake, and let me go," she growls. He presses down on a particularly dark spot to feel for breakage in her ribs, and she makes that noise again. That yelping, groaning keen of pain. Maybe a fracture. How far had she traveled like this?

"You can go sit down while I get some ice," he informs her. She makes noises of protest, but he ignores her words, guiding her to the couch, away from her bag.

She sinks down into the seat, pouting and bristling like an angry child, calling him names under her breath. He rummages through his freezer, pushing aside frozen meals from her last visit, searching for ice packs he knows are around somewhere. It's the only thing he knows to do. Who knows more about this sort of stuff? He can't bring

in an uninformed med nin, it would put her at a place of unease. He thinks long and hard.

"This is stupid Hatake. It's a fucking bruise," he hears from the couch.

"It's deep bruising and possible fractures, not to mention the looseness in your shoulder. Did it fall out of joint?" he returns. He sees her slump as he walks out, ice in hand.

"It's nothing," she insists.

"Lay down and put this on your back. Traveling may have made it worse," he tells her.

She puffs out her cheeks and lays on her stomach on his couch, arms outstretched for a bag. The plastic crinkles as he sets it down over her shirt, the other lower down. The moment the frozen pack touches her she lets out the air in her cheeks in one big rush.

"It could be internal bleeding. Why didn't you go get healed?"

Her flat look tells him he knows the answer. It occurs to him after a moment that he does. She told him before: missing-nin have no access to medical attention. She didn't go because she couldn't.

"First you're a total ass and now this. Make up your mind, Hatake," she mumbles.

He returns her flat look. "What happened?" he asks again. She doesn't answer, instead facing forward, away from him.

"Just another bounty hunter, doesn't matter," she says.

He lets that sink in. Bounty hunters. There are people after her head. It is a strange thing to think about, even considering the price on his own head. She is dangerous, he knows this, but trying to accept the fact that people are constantly after her-that she is never safe-is hard

for him. She seems so brass, so nonchalant. The thought that she could die suddenly, brutally torn apart by her enemies...

It shakes him. Her life is important as the leader of her people, and there would be anarchy if she disappeared. She fights alone, no backup, no help. One falter, one failure, and her life is forfeit. He has Konoha, a place to go home to, but there is no home for Watanabe, no village to keep her safe, no one to help her on her way when she is sick and tired, misguided and lost.

He looks at her, eyes half lidded and staring in the distance. That last part isn't true. She... she came to him. Watanabe sought *him* out for comfort.

Kakashi feels odd, something like guilt gnawing at his chest.

"You need to rest for a while," he says finally. She turns slowly to look at him.

"No training?" she asks.

"No training."

She nods and lets her head rest in her folded arms. There is a moment of silence, but it doesn't last long.

"This is the shittiest apology ever, though. It's gonna take more than this," she tells him, like it's a passing statement.

Really, it is, he didn't even say it. He just acted like a douche, then flipped out when he saw she was hurt. She needs more than that. She needs good, old-fashioned friendship and he is going to give it to her whether he likes it or not. She's talking the whole nine yards.

"Tonight I get to sleep in your bed and you will be my heater," she states finally, ignoring his sputtering.

"Tomorrow, we are having a relaxing day. You are going to invite Wood Boy, and you will partake in the traditional female activity of a

spa day. Like, hair care, nails, face masks, everything. We'll eat junk food and talk about dumb stuff," she declares. She takes a vindictive pleasure in the way he seems to bodily reject the idea.

"No," he tells her.

"Yes," she tells him haughtily.

"Oh?" he asks, eyebrow raised, "And how are you going to force me to?"

"I noticed, Hatake, that you haven't got any files in your hand," she hums out, her eyes coasting to where her bag rests.

He follows her gaze, posture focused and attentive.

"There's some really good stuff in there, like some advice on your trade partners, and maybe a secret from Kumo or two. You know, that village that has a huge hate boner for you?" she asks. She lifts her hand to idly inspect her nails, which are uneven and in need of a good manicure.

"Too bad that pack is chakra locked to my very special signature and has a combustion seal in case of forcible entry." That part is a lie. Yeah it's chakra locked, but like hell is she setting anything on fire. They could force it open if they wanted, but they still couldn't open the scrolls.

"If you really don't want to take care of those horrible split ends and the gross pores on your forehead, it's a shame you won't be getting oodles of secrets. I can find someone else. Maybe your green spandex friend would like it. I bet if I explained all the youthful benefits of the activities, he'd take to spa days like a duck to water. He'd probably love-"

"I'll do it," he relents quickly. Maybe he could go without the files, just to show that Konoha would not bend to her whims. The thought of Guy discovering the joys of beauty care, however, frightens him.

He's realized over the short period of time that he has known Watanabe that it can be hard work, keeping up appearances. Guy loves hard work. He has an obligation to humanity to never let that happen.

She smirks at him, and he scowls beneath his mask, moving the bag into her reach. Five minutes later, there are three files on his hand, but somehow, he still feels like this is a defeat.

"Now that business is done, I need to cook the junk for tomorrow." she proclaims happily, shifting. It's barely been fifteen minutes of rest, and already she is straining. She can't take this shit. It's boring.

"I think-" Hatake starts. She cuts him off with a wave of her hand.

"Walnut rolls, cookies, a cake, and maybe some fried prawns? Yeah, I think that too. I also think that we should have some chips. I can do that. Booze? Maybe. If I write a list, will you go get it?" she requests.

He thinks it over. It's a good opportunity to notify the Hokage and drop off the files. "Acceptable."

"Awesome, now get this cold shit off my back. It's sapping my strength. Then I will cook all the things. Like, so many things Hatake." she states, shuffling up to a crouched position, digging through her pack for a pen and paper.

He sighs and acquiesces.

"This is ridiculous," he informs her later that night. It's beginning to sink in, the kind of deal he has made.

She scoffs, dragging a wide tooth comb through her hair, still damp from the shower. The smell of her soap lingers in the air, mixing with the scent of baked goods. There is a plethora of food in his fridge and cabinets now, more than he thinks is entirely necessary.

"Relax, Hatake, your virtue is safe," she tells him. He shifts in his bed, trying to calm himself, reminding him of his goal. *A mission*, he chants inside his mind, *for the sake of a mission*.

"Why do you even want this?" he asks, unsure. It's a good question. There is no need for this kind of physicality. No need to share this space.

She blinks, and he can see the weariness in her eyes. She is tired and worn, and even though he cannot see the bruises right now, he knows she is in pain. When was the last time she slept?

"I have this weird thing," she starts calmly. "Where, for some reason, my body always seems cold. It was really bad in Kiri. It's cold there, very cold, and I didn't have the luxury of a heater most the time."

His mind sways away from the nervousness and slight embarrassment he feels. This is another one of those things, those intimate shows of what makes Watanabe who she is. It isn't the playful banter she usually sports, or one of her clever word games. It is something given in trust, something not often seen from her.

She comes to the corner of the bed, and he wishes she had more than those infernal shorts and an overlarge shirt on. He has the decency to wear actual sleeping clothes at least.

"I was never warm there. The mist crept into my clothes and the frost went down to my very bones. I remember always shivering and thinking that it was a frozen hell," she tells him. Her hand shifts and she slips beneath the covers. He is stiff and uncomfortable, holding himself still as she scoots closer.

"Then I met Zabuza, and he burned. Even as a child he was a blazing ball of heat, and when I was near him, I could feel that warmth," she tells him. A cool hand searches out and skims over his abdomen until it reaches the other side, her arm embracing his waist.

"After the Graduation Massacre, when we started taking overnight missions, I sought it out even more. We ended up sharing bedrolls as kids," she says softly.

Her hair spills out behind her, and he wonders why she keeps it so long. It must be impractical.

"Then, war broke out. The two of us were assigned under Kisame, and he watched us and made fun of us, but by the end of the first deployment mission, he was in on it too."

Her head rests on his chest, and a leg curls up between his own. It is unfamiliar and odd. He does not know what to feel. They could kill each other like this. They are both vulnerable to attack.

"After we lost our squad, we were sent to the front lines. I remember being scared every time we went out. Scared and angry, because we were children, it was not our war, and I could lose them. I went out, and I fought, and every touch I knew hurt. There was only cold and pain, except for at night when I was with them. When we bedded down, I was in the middle, and it was warm. I was safe, and they were alive. I wasn't alone," she tells him. It is a heavy admission on her part.

The darkness stretches on, the quiet night foreboding and suffocating.

"Now it's warped a bit, but when there is some one else, I feel like that. I feel safe and warm. I don't get so many bad dreams, and I don't wake up scared to piss that someone is raining down hell on me. It's not about seduction, or feelings. It's about knowing I'm not alone, that there is someone else there with me," she finishes. He shifts his arms and it lands in her hair. There is so much of it. Really, why does she need so much hair?

"It's still not proper," he replies.

She laughs and it feels weird, because he can feel her laughing. He feels unsure. "Probably, but I can't help it. Bunkmates are a weakness of mine. Not one that is beneficial for manipulation in any way, because I usually know them fairly well before I initiate cuddling."

He takes a moment to think about that. "You are," he says slowly, "A very physical person."

She huffs out another laugh, slower and sleepier. It's strange to think how capable she is when she seems so... vulnerable like this. It's harder to think of her as a criminal with a history of blood when she seems so childlike and open.

"I know," she says softly, "It's weird. I'm kind of a mess, and I know this makes you uncomfortable, but it makes me feel like less of a piece of shit."

Her statement takes him off guard. She always seems fairly confident in her place in life, of her goals and righteousness. She seems so surefooted.

"Oh?" he prompts when she doesn't say anything for a while. He isn't sure if it's for his own curiosity or for the mission that he wants to know.

"That's why I picked you, because even though you're a village stooge, you know right and wrong. You aren't a terrible person," she whispers.

"What?"

She doesn't answer, simply letting out a distant humming noise. Already she is succumbing to sleep. He doesn't understand. She's in the presence of an enemy, and he knows she doesn't trust him completely, but her breath is deep and even. Like she doesn't care how strange it is.

In the darkness, with a missing-nin's arms wrapped around his stomach like an embrace, her head resting on his chest and her legs tangled with his own, he wonders where his life is taking him. He tries to pinpoint exactly when he became a moral guideline, or how she even drew that conclusion as tiredness takes hold.

Kakashi drifts uneasily into sleep without finding the answer, his arm resting over her bruised back. He doesn't like this contact, but he doesn't hate it either.

AN: So, in this we have a lot going on. Some stress beginning for Ryuishi, and a peek into her travels. We see her brushing off injury, which she would usually complain about. This is to show that her pain tolerance is not only becoming unhealthily high, where she can no longer determine how bad the damage is, and also to show that she gets hurt. A lot. Like, tons of things, all the time. We also see her seeking out companionship, but also feeling like she's being rejected and acting poorly. As we progress, we will see her wanting to talk and be around friends, but isolating herself, or attempting to.

Also, Hatake is having none of it. You may think it's OOC, but he's starting to see her as not only an asset to the village, but a person. A person who sought him out in times of need. A person who needs help, but can't find any. Basically, he's finding that as clever and mature as she seems, Ryuishi is actually five years old and needs a friendmom. A parent companion. Ryuishi is weirdly bad at looking after herself.

Still no planned romance for them, just queerplatonic. Even more plot very soon.

I want to thank my readers, favoriters, and followers. I want to hand out wanted items to every reviewer because You guys keep me going strong. You really do. Honest.

A shout out to my beta enbi! THEY HAVE HELPED ME SO MUCH WITH THE UP COMING CHAPTERS OMG YOU GUYS DON'T EVEN KNOW.

Question: Who or what would you like to see in the side stories fic, Songs gone Unsung? OR When others think of Ryuishi, what do they feel? What comes to mind for the different characters?

Meeting a Spa Day

I do not own Naruto.

Tenzō... does not know what to expect.

He stands outside his captain's red door nervously, the light of the corridor gleaming off his uniform. If he were a lesser man, he would be fidgeting, or sweating, but years of Root training still hold him and he stands at attention, legs shoulder width apart, arms crossed behind his back, face blank.

It's strange to think that at the beginning of this year, he did not know his captain. Odd to think that before he met his capable and respectable taichou, he was another person entirely. Now, in only a few months' time, he feels things. He isn't sure what they are, and sometimes it is easier to shut them out, but he no longer rejects them.

With a calculated, methodical movement, he raises his arm and knocks exactly three times spaced a single second apart. It is morning, and he knows his captain will be awake. He asked for Tenzō to come at this time.

The door creaks open, and noise spills out. There is the shuffling of someone else in the apartment, placing things on some hard surface. The smell of oily food wafts out.

Taichou's head looks down from above, his hand in front of his chest. "Ah, Tenzō," he greets, his fingers flashing through signs. *Under surveillance, follow lead.*

"Good morning, taichou," he greets, signing the affirmative.

Unknown operative, situation unclassified, his captain's hand tells him, *Submit to directive* . "Come in. Breakfast is almost ready," the

silver-haired legend says out loud.

"And leave your ninja nonsense at the door!" a familiar, gratingly husky voice calls out. "Today is a fuckin' spa day!"

Tenzō's heart sinks, but his stomach growls. He steps inside, removing his shoes, and goggles at the unexpected scene that greets him.

His captain's apartment looks strange. There is an invading force creeping over the hard surfaces. Colorful crystal bottles adorn the living room tea table, refracting light like gems. Each one is a different size and shape, and all of them are distinctly feminine. In the corner, a bag rests, scrolls spilling out of its depths like organs out of a gut wound. There is some gauzy, light fabric draped over his leader's couch. It looks soft and inviting. He hates it.

In the kitchen, he smells a mix of spice and oil, and *that* woman is stirring something idly over the oven. Platters and bowls of food line the counter tops, each one amazingly different from the last. His eyes scan over them, all before they halt on the literal mound of beautifully swirled walnut rolls. Good. At least she made those.

He thinks it over, and supposes he should be kinder. After their last meeting and her own admission, he feels like perhaps there is more to her than what he first saw. But it would be easier to make that assertion if she would just wear proper clothes. The shirt she has on isn't even properly sized, and it keeps slipping over her shoulder to reveal some truly painful looking bruising, not to mention the length of her shorts.

"Headgear off!... Unless it makes you feel better or some shit. But that turtle thing around Wood Boy's face has got to go," she says, whirling around with a pan full of golden omelette. It smells good, but he is worried about the hazard her hair is. It's very long, and loose around an open flame.

"How much tea have you had this morning?" his captain drawls. Belatedly, Tenzō realizes that the man has also not changed from his sleep wear. Strange.

"Five cups, because your tea is weak on the caffeine. Step it up, Hatake. I can't function without it and drinking so much makes me have to pee," she admits, slipping the omelette on to the plate and walking it over to him. He accepts the plate blankly, blinking at the oddity of the situation. Is this for him?

"Now, eat up, and then I'm going to mend the shit out of your hair Hatake, and probably Wood Boy's as well. You both have split ends and flyaways like *woah*," she natters on, pulling a pair of chopsticks from a drawer and placing it on the plate. Lost, he looks to his captain, who nods his head. So he *is* supposed to eat it. Alright.

"I'm still not entirely sure it matters," the masked man tells her. She flips her hands, snagging something out of the bowls. A slice of fruit perhaps?

"You say that now, but this is going to be awesome. I haven't had a break in forever. It's been bounty hunters and politics and ball-busting training forever, and I bet it's the same with you guys. Trust me when I say this shit is a billion times better than it sounds in theory," she tells them around a mouthful of... pear? Or is it peach? Apple?

"Politics?" asks his captain.

The woman rolls her eyes and claps her hands, walking between the two of them without answering. For someone who seems to usually be fairly level in her energy output, the behavior she is exhibiting is fairly manic. Tenzō mentally takes note of it. Could be important for psychological evaluations later.

"Usually one would pump low level jams at this sort of thing, but because you two are what I'm going to refer to as 'fun noobs', I'm keeping this low key. That is also the excuse I will give for the

complete lack of booze," she huffs, ignoring the question and picking through the bottles on the table seemingly at random.

The Mokuton user takes a bite of of his omelette. It's good, stuffed with spring onions and some sort of spiced pork and rice. He wants to dislike it on principle, but he will begrudgingly admit that she has a way in the kitchen.

"It would be a poor choice with company. I would also say that-" his captain begins.

"You are a huge fun noob who has no idea how to have a good time? Trust me Hatake, I am a regular fucking riot once I start drinking."

"That's what I'm hoping to avoid."

"One day, you will witness me at the height of my power. On that day you will know true fun, but we have to settle because you are a huge bummer," she retorts, flinging a bottle towards the man. It sails a little to the left and she winces, but his captain, ever capable, manages to snatch it out of the air anyway.

Tenzō watches as her features smooth over like the incident never happened. "Sniff that. Tell me if it's going to mess up your nose," she orders, going back to the bottles, sorting through them.

His captain hesitantly uncaps the container and runs it beneath his nose. From his lack of reaction it seems alright. "What is this?" he asks uncertainly, continually attempting to gain a distinctive scent from it. Some sort of fat, and something light but at the same time strong. He has no name for it.

"Coconut oil, tea tree oil, and rosemary essence. Good for your hair itself and great for your scalp. Which, frankly Hatake, is looking a little gross."

The silver haired man gives her a dead look. "You want me to put this in my hair?" he asks.

"Actually I will, because I don't trust you to do it right. You will then leave it in anywhere from forty-five minutes to several hours. And yes, I do. You made this agreement, Hatake. You back out now and I'll get Guy, I swear to god."

Tenzō grips his chopsticks tighter, still methodically working his way through his plate. Her black eyes turn on him and seem to analyze every feature, her fingers tightening around a small jar. He knows he is next, and his nervousness increases.

"Your hair is dull and looks like it has residual buildup. You get the apple vinegar and then honey," is her verdict.

What sort of black magic is this?

"Hatake, while your hair soaks, I swear I am going to shape your nails if it's the last thing I do. They disgust me. Are you biting them? Wood Boy, take off your fucking headpiece already. Your skin is screaming for tender care. How can you ignore it like that?" she asks, pulling strange shaped tools from a case under the table. Where did it come from?

"Why?" he asks. He misses the intense look from his captain, as if begging him not to say just that.

She picks up a thin file that looks more like a torture instrument than a beauty tool, twirling it in her hand. She inspects it closely before meeting his gaze once more. "Tell me, Wood Boy, do you think image is important?" she asks lowly.

He does not answer. He senses it is a loaded question.

She taps the file against the table lightly. "Because me? I think it's super important. I have an image to maintain, and it is clean, capable, and intimidating as fuck. Nothing is scarier than a person

who can kick your ass twelve different ways and look good doing it," she tells them.

It's not just that, either. She has to be twice as capable and eleven times more put together. She has to maintain the image of not only the ruthlessly fierce Kiri no Ningyo, but the effortlessly composed Rakki Ryuu. Her whole power derives not only from the people, but how those people view her. She has to work around the scars and the bruises and somehow be relatable and leader quality. That means makeup sometimes, and grit in others. It means looking good, and also bad, and knowing how to work every image in between. All of that is easier to do with a well-kept base.

"Think of this as training. It may not make you grow muscle or strain your chakra control, but these activities are not only frequently partaken by others as a form of social interaction, but the end results leave a more... refined physical image. Clean hair and a nourished scalp means no dandruff and less oil in general, meaning there is a fainter scent trail. Same for exfoliated skin. Maintained nails are stronger and better for use in many situations, including clawing your way out of someone's grasp or triggering flat wall switches. Face masks and pore care means one will develop less wrinkles, or imperfections, which can show tells or broadcast identities. No point in a good disguise if you can't hide pimples that will remain no matter what, " she drawls out.

Tenzō thinks that this makes an inordinate amount of sense for such a trivial activity. She speaks well, even if there are gaps in her argument.

"Not to mention, taking time to know your body inside and out is important for more reasons than I can get into right now, " she says lightly, inspecting her palms. "And don't get me started on the stress relieving benefits."

"I think you want to make us uncomfortable," his captain comments lightly, his lone grey eye seeking her out. It startles him to learn that

some time during the rant he removed his headband, and though his scarred eyelid is still closed, it is shocking.

She smirks, standing up. "Well, there's that too. We can call it training to adapt to unusual circumstances."

Kakashi's eye narrows. Why didn't he think of that?

"Now sit down and let your lips do the talking while I rub oil into you hair, Hatake," she orders, snatching up a towel. He grits his jaw and does as she says. If he accommodates her occasional odd request, blackmail aside, she will be more amicable towards his own favors in the future. She knows many things and has proven herself a deep, deep well of reliable information. She might not even have a limit on how much she can learn if she wants to. For access to that, he can take someone rubbing grease into his head.

He never expects to like it, though.

She starts at the tips, and it feels strange at first. He has never had someone do this, play with his hair or just... he doesn't know. It is odd. Odd but good, especially when she gets to his scalp, her fingers rubbing soothing, skin-tingling circles on his head. He understands his summons so much better now. This is relaxing, this is... pleasant.

No one must ever know how much he enjoys this.

In the distance he can hear a plate being washed, most likely Tenzō, but it ceases to matter. He doesn't want to give in to this exercise in vanity, this waste, but her fingertips make little circles near the back of his neck and the top of his crown. Ten digits pulsing with just the right amount of pressure. A tension he didn't even know he had begins to ease.

"Wood Boy, you're next, face thingy off," she comments lightly. He opens his eye, slightly disappointed it is coming to an end so soon, but also relieved. He can shove that unexpected surprise

somewhere else and examine it later... after she stops moving her fingers.

There is an intake of breath then, sharp and quick. He turns to view whatever it is, and see's his kohai without his happuri removed, which is normal.

"Oh," the woman above him whispers, "Woah."

Without his stupid turtle face thing and his chin shirt-and really, a chin shirt? What the fuck?-Tenzō... Yamato... he's. Well. He's fairly good looking. With a strong jawline and chiseled cheeks, he's actually... well. That is to say. That head thing hid some stuff. Like, his whole face changed completely for no apparent reason.

"Shit, you're attractive," she blurts, and then immediately regrets. She wrestles with the urge to punch herself in the face.

Hatake chokes on a startled laugh, and she wishes he would choke on that bag of dicks he needs to go suck. Her face flushes. She can't stand embarrassing herself socially on accident. She can do it if it's on her own terms, but this! This!

The man... boy... man-he's probably the same age as her? The man-boy stares at her, and she stares back, caught in mortification.

"Thank you," he tells her honestly.

Jesus Christ on a cracker, send help! Why is that so... ugh! *Get your shit together*, she hisses inside her mind, *you got this*.

"Ah," she replies stiffly, turning back to the task at hand. "Hatake," she says calmly to the man, "I need you to punch me in the face."

"What?"

"Distract me, quickly, before I make an ass out of myself," she begs.

"Too late," he informs her serenely, "That time has long passed."

Ryuishi groans and removes her fingers from his scalp a little vindictively. She needs to wash her hands, and maybe die in a hole.

"Seriously Hatake, It's not like I planned this," Ryuishi exclaims. The man in question seems to be slowly becoming one with his sofa, his body lax and limbs languid. His hair, freshly washed out after three hours, is still as volumized as ever, but she is happy to report that it is smoother and softer to touch. His skin is also clean, thanks to some milk and gelatin pore strips.

She shapes his nails idly from her seat on the floor, wondering why he fought this so hard. Was it one of those stupid gender things? Or was it exposing too much vulnerability? She doesn't know.

"You are inordinately successful for a missing nin," Tenzō tells her as his own beautiful hair shines. He was skeptical at first, but the results proved themselves. She's delighted that the blank-faced man is getting so into it, even if he has a bit of a tugging problem. He's actually pretty thorough as he spreads oil through her own hair, sitting cross-legged behind her.

"Okay, I didn't pop out of the womb going, 'You know what sounds cool? Being hunted constantly with every organized nation willing to pay for my head.' or 'You know what I want to do when I grow up? Be hired to do some really fucked up wet work by shady fuckers who think that it's totally professional to stare at my ass while they hire me.'"

"Does that really happen?" asks Tenzō, lightly pulling a lock of hair. It feels great, and if she could purr, she would.

"It's amazing how many people will sexually harass you while hiring you for your ability to beat people up," she confesses.

"If you didn't want to be what you are now, what did you want to be?" asks the masked man. She appreciates the way he worded it. He didn't expressly say it, but he implied her status as Rakki Ryuu.

"Well, my first goal was to live peacefully in a warm place that had a stable food supply and great water pressure. Somewhere where I could fish all day and do nothing," she says. "Since that was a mad dream, I made backup plans."

"Plans? As in plural?"

"If this whole ninja thing didn't work out I was going to be a drug lord. I have some whacked out recipes for some fucked up stuff inside my head. It all works, too. Would have sold it as a performance enhancer or marketed it as an energy booster, like soldier pills. Then, I would introduce the hallucinogens. When everybody was hooked, well... lets all be super glad I didn't go through with that plan," she admits. Ah, Meth, how it scared the living hell out of her. Ninjas on meth sounded even scarier, though.

Kakashi takes the time to appreciate the fact that Watanabe turned out to be a capable kunoichi in her own right. As foreboding as the Mumei can seem, he would choose them over drugged up, addiction-fueled, out of their minds minions any day.

"Seriously though, can you guys stop digging for information for like, two seconds?" she finishes, buffing a pinky nail. Damn, she is good at this.

Behind her, Tenzō stiffens ever so slightly, as if he is not used to being called out. Hatake, however, examines his ceiling. There is no use responding to her.

"Instead we should play Kiss, Marry, Kill again."

"No."

"Uno."

"No."

Hatake, ever the party pooper, she thinks.

"Well then, we can sit here in uncomfortable silence. Enjoy it, the disparagingly uncomfortable atmosphere. The awkward noises of everyone shifting and not trying to draw attention to themselves. Have your peace."

"If you keep talking it won't be silent," Tenzō points out calmly.

She scowls at nobody and twists around, slapping his hands out of her hair. He stares that vacant, blank stare while she gathers up the oily locks, twisting them into a bun.

"You go wash your hands and eat more food, skinny boy," she scolds, turning back around to wipe the excess oil on her own hands off on Hatake's pants. The man doesn't even try to move.

"Are you sending my kouhai away because he's flustering you?" the bastard asks.

She grits her jaw and gets back to work. "I hope your summons take a dump on your floor," she curses.

At this he rolls his head to the side to look at her. He looks extraordinarily aghast at that statement, like the very notion of it offends him. "They would *never* do that."

"Dogs will be dogs," she snarks flippantly, dropping his palm and reaching for the other. He gives his hand over without a thought.

"My summons are intelligent and refined. They aren't dumb animals," he defends.

She rolls her eyes and inspects the damage. Seriously, how does he get his short little nails so fucking dirty? Half of this is her making sure they're clean. Disgusting.

"I have watched smarter people do dumber shit," she says frankly.

She has too, she really, really has. Like the microbiologist undergrad girl she had dated back in college who drove drunk. Or Kagami, who

tried to convince her to sell her Mizuage when she discovered that Ryuishi still had that mythical, made up thing known as virginity. She's also fairly certain Orochimaru does dumb stuff as well, she has just hasn't caught him in the act yet.

"Don't compare people you know to my summons," he replies.

"Since I only really hang around you and yours, you just made a horrible implication, Hatake," Ryuishi points out.

He leans back, and the round goes to her. She hopes it makes up for the one she lost when Tenzō removed his happuri and accidentally revealed his pretty, stupid, beautiful face.

Change the subject, change the subject, her mind screams at her.

Her mind churns for a while, and all she can think is that she is so done with hormones. She can't wait to be twenty something again, where her body finally figures out that this is some bullshit and she reigns over her thoughts with an iron fist. Man, it's so weird being young again. So crazy. Having a beauty day in with other teenagers-or is it adults?-feels strange. Domestic. Even if they are all trained killers.

She sits in muted thought and feels like punching herself in the face. This is ridiculous. If she stops to think about how ridiculous her life is, she will certainly go mad. She reaches out for a distraction, any distraction, anything at all.

The silence is deafening as she tries, and fails. No one notices her inner turmoil. That's cool with her, though. Ryuishi has stopped expecting people to. Everybody has their own problems.

She reaches out with her free hand and snags a cookie from the platter on the table near her, and focuses on buffing out Hatake's index nail.

It's later, when Tenzō has left and the place is clean, that she finally goes to take a shower and wash the oil out of her hair. Hatake is somewhere, doing his thing, probably turning in a report to the Hokage or some shit.

She steps into the shower and lets the hot liquid slide over her limbs, easing away the treatments left on her skin. Ryuishi lets her mind wander a bit while the water drenches her and forms rivulets down her neck, between her breasts, and down her legs. She watches it quietly before reaching out for her shampoo, lathering it up and working the suds through her hair.

She's nearly done shaving when she gets that feeling, that tingling on her neck and the prickle down her spine. She is being watched.

Lazily, she finishes up the leg and casts her eyes around, suddenly on edge. Hatake's bathroom only has a tiny vent to let out steam, and there are no windows. Doujutsu? Maybe. She knows nobody could hide in here without her noticing them first. The bathroom is too small, and lacks cover.

Her hands are working the last bits of conditioner out of her hair when something slithers over her foot. She freezes, her heartbeat picking up. Black eyes look down cautiously, and meet serpentine gold. There is a snake, some sort of racer, coming out of the drain pipe. For a moment she is struck with pity. Poor little noodle, having to go through pipes, getting all soapy. Poor, poor baby.

She reaches down, and other thoughts take over as she helps pull it clear. She feels the strong, prehensile body of it wrap around her arm as her free hand reaches out to turn down the heat just a bit. The serpent is slick and wet, just like her, but she trusts it to hold on.

"Sorry cutie," she whispers as it nudges her ribs beseechingly, "I don't bring treats in the shower."

The creature retreats a bit, looking as disappointed as a snake can. It takes it only a moment to get down to business, though, and its

mouth opens up and a scroll slides out. Ryuishi hurries to snatch it up and keep it clear of the spray, wondering what was so urgent that Orochimaru (or Kabuto, she supposes) would risk sending a summon for.

She lets the serpent slither up further until its long, lithe body finds its way to her shoulders and neck. With one hand she flicks the seal open, ignoring the way it seems to creep back down her naked torso. Snakes have no concept of human sexuality, so she has no problems with it hanging out for a little. Ryuishi reads the missive.

If anyone else was watching, they would see the moment the missing-nin understood the message. Her brow furrows, and her eyes narrow in anger and fear. Something tenses in her shoulders, and her free hand tightens into a fist.

"Return," she hisses to the weary reptile, "and let him know he has my thanks."

The scaled creature flicks its tongue out in understanding and disappears with a puff of smoke, which is quickly covered up by the steam. Its scent washes away with the last bits of floral, fruity soap. Ryuishi steps out of the shower, and prepares to leave at once.

AN: So the dialogue got away with me a bit in this chapter, and most of it is just bonding time. I should point out that Ryuishi expects people to not help her or give a shit unless she makes them though. Also that she only got Kakashi to do this because 1) she blackmailed him, 2) He's trying to make her feel comfortable around him and open up. Also that Tenzo does not understand basic human interaction.

I honestly do not know how to feel about this chapter. It's weird and almost crackish, but not?

Thank you to everyone who read, fav-ed, and followed. Bless you. To those who leave me reviews, I'm sorry if I didn't reply,

and also yOU ARE THE LIGHTS OF MY LIFE. FEED ME.

**To my beta enbi: Seriously, I could not do this without you.
Thank you for all your hard work.**

**Question: What type of alternate universe trope (like
highschool, coffee shop, victorian era, fairy tale creatures, ect.)
could you see these characters in, and what would they do? OR
When Ryuishi and Kakashi woke up after sharing a bed, how
did they react? Who was draped over who? Was someone
snoring? Was there awkward tension?**

Meeting Repressed Instinct

I do not own Naruto.

It's amazing, she will figure later, how quickly that roaring, horrible monster inside her head can come out if the right switch is tripped. But right now, it is a struggle. There is no off switch available, no outlet or comfort. There is desperation singing inside her heart, fear flooding her veins. But more than that, there is a flood of rage so pure, so intense, her hands are shaking.

Gaara, it howls, *GaaraGaara* **Gaara** .

It takes every ounce of her willpower not to run to him, to throw herself at the basin walls of Sunagakure and tear it down. To rip his hurts to shreds, to feel that visceral, slimy feeling of an enemy's flesh slide between her fingers and teeth.

She's shivering with how angry she is, her body twitching and shaking, adrenaline like fire running through her veins. *How dare they*, the beast howls, *how dare they try to hurt what is ours. How dare they move against us. How dare they be so inconceivably stupid* .

She lays alone, floating in some spring-fed pool in The Land of Rivers, and holds herself back. That still-sane, logical piece of her struggles against the desire to maim, to tear, to devour.

You knew this was a possibility, it murmurs, you accepted that it was a chance. If you cannot keep yourself together, you will only make things worse. You cannot destroy a whole village, not without collateral, not without the loss of innocent lives, not without the loss of your own life. You are not strong enough. Not everybody is plotting against you, some may not even know. You need to be there for him, for the victim. You need to be calm and collected, not wild

and out of control. How can you piece him back together if you only want to tear things apart?

Ryuishi shivers inside the chilly water, focusing on the horrible sensation of cold it gives her. The liquid vibrates around her, almost alive.

The first assassination attempt on Gaara has taken place, and she was nowhere near him when it happened. That logical part of her brain tells her it is for the best, if this is how she was going to react.

Hell, Hatake had even picked up on her violent distress after reading Orochimaru's missive. It probably wasn't hard to do, especially as trained as he was. She feels sort of bad about how crazy she must have seemed, stepping out of the shower and scrabbling for her pack, practically vibrating with unfocused wrath. He had been good though, so good, and done exactly what she needed. Fuck, Hatake had been practically a pro when it came to directing her in that state. He had heard her choked of snarl of, "Trigger, out of the village, now," and watched her nails dig into her fists and saw her straining composure. He fucking guided her through the exits without being seen. She would have stormed through the streets without a care and ruined the whole thing she had there if left on her own.

A part of her, not drowning in rage or straining to hold that beast down, whimsically wonders if Konoha trains its handlers for that sort of thing. Was there a class he had to take, where he was taught to read the signs of somebody about to fucking snap? Did he have pop quizzes on the correct behavior for treating mentally unstable, violently inclined assets to the village? Or maybe it all his experience as an ANBU captain. Did he watch firsthand as one of his teammates went feral? Was it an enemy? Perhaps it was just her, and somewhere, in their dossiers and files, it painted the history of her berserker behavior. Recorded incidents on the battlefield where she was pushed too far, and she changed, all written out in sterile black and white.

The monstrous piece of her wails, and she imagines its claws raking through her mindscape, sharp teeth gnashing and body thrashing around.

Destroy, hurt, maim, it calls out, seek and eviscerate, limb from body, soul from flesh. Rend and tear.

Gaara, the logical part whispers, child, baby, little brother. Focus on the victim, remember your limits. Composure. Give in, and you will ruin everything.

Ryuishi knows which one is right, even though it would feel so good to give in to the anger. She sharpens her mind and turns her attention to the cold seeping in her fingers and toes. She revels in the pins and needles as the water draws her out and away from the anger. She distracts herself with anything else than her desire to destroy, her innate violence.

Good, the logical part soothes, find your center. Soothe yourself, then we can move on.

She imagines blue-grey arms forcing her still, and imagines the smell of deep water and brine, mixed with the fresh scent of blood from the battlefield. The sharp stink of weapons oil joins it, and sturdy, firm weight pinning her down. She conjures the images of them inside her head until she can see their ghosts before her. Everyone is bruised and battered. Some from the battle, some from the struggle between the three of them that came afterward, where they were all keyed into a vicious frenzy of violence. The after battles, those games the three of them played when there was still a need to work through the monsters inside them.

She replays the memory in her mind another time, letting it wash over her. The cold helps immerse her, sinking into her bones like the frost and snow of Water Country.

The monster inside her head snaps its teeth, and her body twitches, but it too, stills. It misses those monsters. Its own kind, its pack, its

pod, its family. It misses the harmony of hunting together, of vocalizing across the terrain to hear the return howls of its own kind.

" *It's over*," she remembers Kisame saying, his chest rumbling against her back, his voice throaty from shouting and warbling with the changes of puberty.

" *We won*," grunts Zabuza, burning like a furnace, his weight against her legs.

The beast churns, agitated and restless. It recalls the sensation of soothing and fullness.

Ryuishi drifts, her focus spreading thin, slowly unwinding from holding the thrashing beast. Her mind notices the wind sweeping through the willowy trees, rustling the leaves. She listens to the distant birdsong, the chirping and chattering of tiny, finch-like things, and bigger, cockatiel-like avian creatures.

Gaara, the monster calls, but with less need. Colder, more focused. Driving, but not consuming.

Gaara, agrees the logical part, collected.

Ryuishi stirs, her breathing even and cool. The cold shocks her, and her skin feels numb, but the sound of liquid dripping off of her into the spring is grounding, drawing her out of her meditative state. Her body is still shaky, but she expected it to be. It is the aftershock of such demanding emotion, such draining need. It is the physical symptom of adrenaline flowing away, and the other parts of her mind coming back together after being smothered out by the two giants. Her chest aches with regret and guilt. Relief is distant and comforting. Pride sparks faintly at her control, which has grown so much from where it was.

She slides out and checks her bag before cleaning herself up from her flight from Konoha and muted rampage away from Fire Country.

She needs to be there for her otouto, but she needs to keep her cover and her calm. She needs to remain hidden and stable.

Her trader persona has a schedule that must be kept, and though it is not an exact thing, her turning up early would be suspicious. She won't go to Kagami's, not agitated and unfocused, so close to losing it. She will wait at home, where she can gather herself and prepare.

Wait a little longer baby boy, she prays, Aneue is coming.

Rasa, the Fourth Kazekage, leader of Sunagakure and father of three, has made many sacrifices in his life. It is not a simple thing, and it is never easy, but he has done what he thinks is best for his village.

It has cost him, and the weight he shoulders is a heavy thing.

When he came into office, he was given a mountain of troubles to work with, and he did his very best to raise the village from the ashes of the Third Shinobi War and the economic depression. With the remains of a once-great nation and a people torn and tired, he built as best he could. When the Wind Daimyo turned his back on his people, Rasa stood beside them and used his Gold Dust to keep them from being swept away in the sands. When trade grew sparse and mission requests declined, he cut taxes and encouraged self-sufficiency in the market, and decided to make Suna stand not for the quantity of soldiers, but the quality. He showed them that he would not demand something he could not give, and gave his own children to the cause. His eldest daughter, his first son, and more than anything, his youngest child.

Gaara was the first jinchuuriki to ever be born one. Before he was even came into this world, he contained the One-Tail, and he was supposed to be the symbol of the new regime. His control was supposed to reign supreme, and his dedication was supposed to be second to none. He expected great things from his youngest before he ever left the womb.

It cost him everything. The night his child was born before his time, he lost the love of his life, and his heart hardened. Even in pain and despair, he did what was best for his people. He gave his children to the cause, and the first two rose to the occasion. The last... the last did not.

Gaara was a quiet child, he was curious and needy. He was an example of clinginess and desire for affection, but most of all, he was a failure in control.

Rasa looks up to the warehouse, where his failure sits, quiet as the grave and completely engrossed in his... *task*. He knows not who taught the boy this, who taught him to focus on swirling lines and tangled designs. The pattern spreads out over every surface, the walls, the ceiling, the furniture, and the floors. The red headed child has not slept, has barely eaten, and drinks the bare minimum required. He has not spoken since the incident involving his uncle, save for a simple demand that he reiterates at random.

"Give me Aneue," he states, distant and cold, "Bring her to me."

The Kazekage's coldness towards the boy grows. This child, this *monster* -he demands the presence of a foreigner, an outsider.

Rasa wonders if he will deign to give his son such. While he failed to contain the beast completely, the child did show promise. It was a half transformation, one that will haunt him to be sure, but the boy fought it every step of the way. The council dismisses this, but some know better to throw away progress.

"Suna owes that girl a great debt," the old woman by his side states, looking at the child. "As do you, Rasa."

The man looks toward his adviser, the puppet mistress from years long past. "She is a foreigner, Chiyo-san," he says coldly. "A whimsical civilian with no ties to us."

The grandmother hums, and the wrinkles around her face deepen. Stern eyes turn on the father, piercing and judgmental. "That foreigner has done more for this village than most. When there was no trade, she came and gave it. She led more here, those with goods and produce not seen for many years. More than that, there was water there, barrels and barrels, whole wagons with it. All at reasonable, fair prices. The traders not only sold, but bought as well," she scolds.

His eyes sharpen and he grits his teeth. "I am aware," he forces out. Indeed, she had done so. Some no-name slip of a woman had done what he failed to do for years. It settled poorly with him.

The old woman hums, and he thinks that it sounds like the grunt of a desert toad. Unkind, but honest. "Are you aware the personal favor she has done for you?" she asks, her eyes sliding to the boy. He follows her gaze.

"Those designs, this focus. It is not your hand, nor is it his late uncle's," she states calmly. "This method is strange, but it is an outlet, a distraction from the beast raging within. The boy does not fight the change because he cares for you, Kazekage-sama. He does not battle for a parent who he does not know, or a family withheld from him. He does not struggle because of loyalty to the village."

The implications are unsettling. "Speak clearly, Chiyo," he demands.

Her eyes, wise and tired, stay trained on the boy. "You made him into a weapon without an enemy. There was nothing for him to fight against, and there was no teaching other than to destroy. Before she came, he was barely holding on. His accidents cost lives, and were growing in number. The reports will state as much. They will also show how after her company, they not only lessened in frequency, but ferocity. You made a mistake, Rasa. We all did."

His hands curl into fists at his side. He is beginning to see.

"He loved Yashamaru more than anything, that is to be sure, but Yashamaru never needed protecting. He was family, doing what he did because he was supposed to. The trader had no such obligation. In trying to fill the hole left by her brothers, she filled one in him we as shinobi did not see." She sighs.

"What could a civilian give here that we could not? What more did the boy need? He has never gone hungry, never been without shelter and care. He has tutors and toys. What more could he want?" he demands.

"She gave what all people need, shinobi or civilian," she answers. "She gave the boy kindness, she gave him attention, and love. She came back again and again, without cause, without price, and she showed him another part of life. With her he need not be driven, there was no call for him to be the best, the strongest, the most capable. She demanded nothing from him but himself, and accepted everything that came with."

Rasa stills, and begins to grasp hold of what the old woman is saying. After a village feared him, scorned him, after he himself demanded the best, this woman came in and usurped his control effortlessly. Gaara had no need to carve out a place for himself when one was offered so freely.

The worst part is he observed her doing it. He watched as time passed and the bonds were made. He assumed that the strides in Gaara's control were Yashamaru's doing, and ignored the woman as nothing more than a pleasant economic surprise who also furthered the positive image of his son. People saw her with him, and they saw a small child with an adult. They saw a part of their village, not a demon.

"How do I fix this?" he asks, frustrated and ill at ease.

The old woman shakes her head. "I do not know. Elimination is out of the question. We would lose the trade, and our own people have come to enjoy her, if only a little. Not only that, but Gaara would

destabilize completely, and I do not know if the seal work would contain the beast, even after you beat it down. Losses would be great, not only in lives, but morale."

"She is a foreigner. We cannot allow her to have such hold," he says coldly.

"Then the work ahead of us is great. Make ties with other merchants, diminish her hold on trade, but do so slowly. Diversify. It took her years to work up to her place, and it will take years to slip from it. Draw her power from her, do not tear it away," she advises.

He sees the logic in it. "And my son?" he asks.

Chiyo stares at the boy, who even now carves a swirling pattern onto the walls with his sand, his tiny hand clutching at his sea-glass necklace.

"Needs her," she answers. "Your experiment failed, Kazekage-sama, and you may hold the power to cage him, even direct him, but he has no love for Sunagakure. Expose him to his family more, to his brother and sister. Become present in his life, and perhaps in time things will change, but know for now that it is not you he looks to for guidance and comfort."

Rasa hates the bitter taste in his mouth. *I am sorry, my love*, he prays. *Forgive me again for yet another failure.*

"Ingratiate her to Suna itself, though I doubt it will work. Give her cause for resentment, or drive her away, and the consequences will be great," she murmurs.

He sighs and brings his hands to his temples. The council will rage against this, hate it as much as he himself hates it.

"When she comes, bring her to him. Do not despair Rasa, you are not without power," Chiyo states, turning her gaze back to her leader. He looks up, wondering how.

The old woman's eyes sparkle with cunning. "She may not be loyal to us, but that woman needs your son as much as we need her. I have read the reports. No person would take so much if they were not dedicated to the cause. She loves him, Rasa."

Something in his gut eases. *Love*, he thinks, staring at the brand marring his son's forehead. A nebulous concept, but a powerful one. The merchant may be tangled in the infrastructure and workings of his village. She may not belong to Sunagakure, but she is tied to it by his son.

Rasa thinks of the reports, of how she has nurtured and doted on the boy, how she must have taken losses in sales but came back regardless, always seeking out the child. This power goes both ways, and without knowing, the boy has wrangled Suna much through her love of him.

Perhaps, he thinks, his youngest is not such a failure after all.

Rasa waits for her arrival, which is slated to be within the next two weeks. There is a stroke of luck, and she comes on the earlier half of the allotted time.

(In reality, Ryuishi could only clean her house so many times in a desperate attempt to keep her calm. There was only so much silence she could take, only so many hours spent diving could halt her thoughts from their chaotic, frantic drive. *Naruto, sliding away. Gaara, in need. The files, Kisame, Zabuza, the Uchiha, Orochimaru. Naruto, Gaara.*)

The civilian trader comes in the in the late afternoon, when the winds are picking up speed. They scatter dust and grains faster than usual, carrying something heavy, promising to only get worse.

It is fitting that the desert reflects his desires, chasing her towards the gates, a dust storm on her heels.

He watches her from afar, her tired smiles and baseless chatter. For the rest of the day, and a single night, her gives her rest. Were she a kunoichi, her would demand her presence immediately, but she is a civilian. Her lack of suspicion says as much, as does her trust. When his adviser comes, wrapped in the guise of a harmless old woman, she follows the her, basket and all. She leaks nervous energy, so thick Rasa can taste it. He supposes that though she may not notice the ANBU and himself, even hares know when hawks are watching.

Ryuishi herself is sold for about three whole minutes by Chiyo's facade. It's impressive, she thinks, that it takes her so long to place the woman. She is a gifted deceiver, but there is no hiding the telltale scars on her wrinkled fingertips. Those are puppet string scars.

Already on edge, she struggles with herself as the weight of eyes settle on her, numerous in number. The monster inside stirs, agitated. It is so close to the surface.

She settles and tries to find the game the others are playing. There is no way this just happens like this. No way things go so smoothly. They aren't just going to... bring her to him are they?

She doesn't give a flying fuck what they call it. 'New area for enrichment' her ass. 'Calming environment after recent family trouble' makes her want to tear the old woman limb from limb. Family trouble is finding out your brother fell off a roof and broke an ankle, this was forced assassination and emotional manipulation of a fucking child.

She doesn't know why. She only knows what the missive said.

"Ah, excuse me honorable elder?" she demurs, and the polite smile spreading across her face physically pains her to do.

"Speak up child, I can't hear so well these days," the woman gripes. Ryuishi calls bullshit inside her head.

"Is it... is it alright for me to see him?" she asks, false sheepishness coating her tongue. *Play the part, play the part, play the motherfucking part*, she chants in her mind.

"Eh?" the granny asks.

"If Gaara-kun is having family trouble, is it alright for me to see him? I've noticed he's important, and I wouldn't want to intrude," she lies smoothly. Saying he's the Kazekage's son without actually saying he's the Kazekage's son is fairly simple.

The woman positively cackles, and Ryuishi feigns bewilderment. She wants to rip the lady's tongue out, then maybe tear into the ANBU watchers. Fuck them. Fuck them all, *where is her baby boy ?*

"Should have asked that question before you got into this mess dear," the woman tells her. Good, by that statement they think she's just a dumb fuck in over her head.

"Besides, he's been asking for you. He won't settle for anybody else."

Ryuishi has to restrain every fiber of her being from reacting to that. She wants to wail like an animal. Sweet, shy, curious Gaara called for her, and she made him wait.

They approach a building, a dome among fucking domes. The wind around them whips ferociously, and the older woman pauses by the entrance, giving Ryuishi one last once over. The forced glee fades from her features, and she looks stern.

Chiyo takes in dirty, well-worn pants and a cutoff top underneath a protective robe. She sees a girl out of her depth, with a pretty face and deep eyes. *A civilian*, her eyes tell her. *Something else*, whispers her gut. There is something to this woman, but strength or not, she deserves a choice. There is a chance Chiyo will not be able to pull her out in time if the child transforms. Not that she thinks he

will, or that she is that slow. It is a slim, negligible thing, but she deserves to know.

"Before you see him, you should know he's in quite a temper," she warns, watching for a reaction. "He's dangerous, child."

Ryuishi thinks on it only for a second. Zabuza is dangerous. Kisame is dangerous. Kakashi is dangerous. Orochimaru is dangerous.

Her hand reaches up to touch the scar lining her neck, playing it up. She takes a moment to really act like it means something to her. To act like she could die.

"I lived through a shinobi war in a country between two Elemental Nations," she says, a half truth. The old woman eyes the scar with new interest. "I cannot leave another brother when he needs me," she whispers. Dramatic, she thinks, but still kind of true.

A head full of grey hair nods, and opens the door. Ryuishi raises her head, squares her shoulders, and walks through. Chiyo slides in after her, and thinks about what her gut was trying to tell her.

Strength, she finally decides. *That little girl has grit.*

When Ryuishi steps inside the building, the first thing that registers is the cessation of wind and drop in temperature. It sparks a trail of goosebumps along her arms and legs as she flings off her pack. The old woman slides in after her, silent as the grave, and stands hidden in the shadows behind her.

Then, Ryuishi notices the designs. The sight of them makes her draw in a breath, and her eyes widen. They aren't zentangles, images of patterns upon patterns. No, they are too detailed, too perfect. Her poor eyesight doesn't even allow her to see the scope of it, because some are so small, so infinitesimally tiny-it's mindboggling. Over every surface Gaara has scrawled geometric patterns weaving in and out of each other. No, not scrawled...

etched. He has carved them in with constantly moving, finely controlled sand, eroding his way down into the materials. Like an ancient Persian temple, no space is wasted.

A heartbeat passes, and she see him. He is hunched, seated on the ground, and he is watching her intently. For a second, she feels relief.

Her eyes dart up, and that breath she took sticks in her throat. Rage, burning hot and sour in her stomach, thrashes against her restraints. She can feel it like blood on her skin, taste it like bile in her mouth. There is a curious, ringing silence in her ear.

The Kanji for love stands out against his forehead like a brand.

She takes a shaky step forward. "Otouto," she calls, and her husky voice is heavy, the saliva in her mouth thick and viscous, making it hard to speak.

His lip wobbles.

She takes another step, and another. It isn't the hurried rush she wants it to be. She can't run and scoop him in her arms like she wants. Ryuishi is treading a thin line, perilously close to losing herself to that anger inside her head, and giving herself away to those who watch. Every step is a struggle, a fight to keep in control. She is compromised by this little boy. Loathing and despair mingle inside her heart as she approaches, kneeling beside him.

"Gaara," she whispers. Her hands are shaking again, and she can feel the shivers in her limbs. She wants to *crush* them, to lash out and guard her baby boy, wrap him up in her clawed hands and never let him go.

He blinks, and his face crumples. There is a small, weak little sniff, and then another. She takes in wide, seafoam green eyes beginning to water, and she slowly wraps herself around him. Gaara begins to wail, and she pulls him close to her chest, hiding him with her own

body, sheltering from the outside world. Her own eyes sting as he shrieks, his hands clutching almost violently at her clothes, holding on so very tightly. He burrows his head into her chest, and he fucking *cries*, half mad with sorrow and anger.

"Shhh," she warbles out, and her eyes are wet as she curls around him, pressing her face into his hair. Her legs enclose around him and she draws him closer still, a dragon looping around her precious hoard. "Shhh, baby, shhh, I'm here," she whispers. He is trembling against her, but it is only fair, because she is doing the same.

The sand in the room begins to stir, agitated and restless, and she feels, rather than sees the old woman in the corner begin to tense.

"Shhh," she coos. "My sweet little one, my brave baby boy."

He flails, and she sees a loss of control, just a slip, as he tears her cloak open, ripping through it in his incoherence, his fists wrapped tight in the fabric. It's okay. She understands.

"I've got you," she whispers. "I've got you now, Aneue is here."

His wail is muffled in her collarbone, and she can feel his chakra spiking, malevolent and cruel. That same intoxicating mess that surrounded Killer B when they met, but unrefined. It courses through her veins and swims in her head. She tightens her own hands into claws, drawing in a choking gasp. The monster thrashes as the Void blooms beside it, hungry for that chakra, and she spasms in what she can only hope the others will say is fear. It isn't. It is heady and thick like alcohol, like heroin, and it sings of life inside her.

"Oh Gaara," she whispers, and the sand lashes out around them. Not at her, because she is wrapped so tightly around him, but at the walls and furniture.

He cries, and her skin is wet and snotty where his face is, and her own cheeks are wet. The two of them make quite a pair, that distant

part of her thinks, their monsters swimming so close to the surface, desperate and hungry.

"It hurts," he keens, his tiny voice rough.

"Tell me," she whispers.

Give me one more excuse, the monster inside rasps . Let me tear this place to the ground.

"It hurts inside, it hurts and I hate it. I hate it, *I hate it*, **I HATE IT** ," he roars.

"I know, I know," she soothes. Sand whirls and scrapes underneath her cloak, scratching her skin. She can barely feel it.

His voice changes, rough and layered with something else. Bijuu chakra spills out, and she drinks it in. Distantly she is aware of somebody trying to attach chakra strings to her limbs, but the sand moves, blocking it, swirling like a barrier around them.

"It's alright, Gaara," she says. The noise is deafening, the friction of sand on sand spiking the heat inside, and the roar of the dust storm outside a dull accompaniment to the cacophony within the building.

"What is it?" he asks, and she sees him struggling, sees the pressure building. Apathy fills her. If he rages, she will join him, that is a fact. She can only fight so much.

"What is it?" he asks again, pulling away a little bit, and this time he touches that vile brand, his fingers ghosting over the kanji for love.

"It is great and powerful," she answers, and her eyes move to his own. Seafoam green spills over with black and the barest hints of gold.

"It comes in many shapes and forms. Compassion, empathy, passion, obsession. Friends, family, lovers, flings. It can lead to great heights or terrible depths," she whispers. She takes in the tear tracks

and the water spilling out, and she feels how utterly focused both the child and the monster are on her words.

She isn't even thinking, it just comes out. There is no forethought, there is no plan.

"Love is giving someone a gift," she whispers.

He breathes in sharply.

"Through faith, hope, trust, or experience, it is praying that they won't use it against you," she states.

There is a moment of strange silence, of utter, insane clarity. She leans forward and presses her forehead against his own. Her cool hands gently untangle his fingers from her torn cloak, and she holds them for a single moment before drawing them up.

Ryuishi takes his little hands and stares into his eyes, both black, gold, and light teal, and she places his palms on her throat. Ever so slowly, she wraps his fingers around her neck as far as they will go. They are too small to wrap around completely, but they are strong, and he has his sand.

"I love you," she whispers.

Gaara sits in muted shock and looks up into her eyes. Deep black watches and waits, accepting and understanding.

We could do it, the grating voice in the back of his head says, sounding awed. **We could kill her, that thing wearing human skin.**

He notes the coolness of her skin against his, and he feels her shaking hands rubbing his back. It is... it is the opposite of Yashamaru. She does not fight, she does not struggle, and for a second he is tempted to do it so nothing can hurt him again. He did not want to give her that gift, he never even knew. He looks down to

his hands and the sand whirling against her slender neck. The grains scrape her skin, and he stares. His grip tightens for a second.

There is a scar, they note, both child and bijuu. She has given the gift, and it has cost her before.

I love you, her voice echoes inside their mind again. After having it broken, after having someone use it against her, she still gives it away. To him, to a monster. To them both.

A sob rolls through him, and his hands tremble.

"Aneue," he whimpers, and he moves, wrapping his arms around her.

"Outoto," she replies, drawing him close, holding him near.

Together, surrounded by a shifting dome of sand, they cry.

AN: There is a lot of stuff I want to clarify in this chapter. So, 1) Look at Ryuishi's control! Yay! Not smashing everything and killing herself! 2) In no way could she actually do that stuff, she would die trying though. 3)Rasa is a very good leader, but a terrible father. He is the only reason sand exists today. 4) Yashamaru did try to kill Gaara, and Gaara half transformed. He did not destroy tons of the village. 5) Shukaku knows there is something strange about Ryuishi's chakra. 6) Ryuishi gets kinda turnt on Bijuu Chakra. 7) Chiyo is clever, and suspicious. 8)Ryuishi feels guilty for this happening. 9) Ryuishi remembers Kisame and Zabuza to calm down.

There's probably more, but I couldn't tell you what it is right now. Oh! I have SGU chapters, but they are unedited, so...

Thank you to all me readers, fav-ers, and followers. You guys give me life. My reviewers CAN HAVE ME. I LOVE THEM. OH MY GOD.

Everybody thank Enbi, because they are the one who got this out early. Bless enbi, and their rapid fire Beta skills.

Question: With Ryuishi's influence and emphasis on sibling bonds, how do you think Gaara will interact with Kankuro and Temari? OR What was Kakashi thinking when he led her out of Konoha?

Meeting Turmoil

I do not own Naruto.

Rasa heads toward the warehouse containing his son the moment his adviser's chakra flares out in warning. It takes only seconds to feel the telltale trickle of bijuu chakra following it, writhing like an illness against his senses.

The dust storm rages, and there is something foreign inside of the raging sand and wind. It is something heavy that prickles familiarly in the back of his head, but he is focused on the task at hand, moving through his ANBU like a kunai cutting through the air. His gold dust is ready, swarming around him, and he doesn't even make it completely inside the building before his gift is struggling with his son.

The dome in front of him spits out heat, and the noise it creates is a hideous thing, a deafening cacophony that mingles with the howling of the wind. Glittering gold streaks out to smother it, to crush it and wipe it away, but the sand struggles against the metal with a life of its own. It grinds and shifts, capturing the lustrous material and spreading it, stretching it thin.

Rasa struggles for the first time, shuffling the detail away for later. Now he needs to focus on suppressing the beast. It takes him longer than it ever has before, an impressively long three minutes to break through the defense, and even then it is attempting to rebuild itself. He smells no death when the top of the dome caves, and he takes it as a blessing.

He tears down the sand defense, bit by bit, until he is greeted by an astonishing sight. His face is impassive and stone-like as he gazes onward, but there is no illusion before him. There is only a merchant woman in a torn cloak curled around his son, holding him tight as he

slowly begins to drift off. Her skin is scraped raw in places, and there are tear tracks drying on her cheeks, but she is alive and whole, if tired and shaking.

His sharp ears pick up on something beneath the noise outside, something low and melodic.

She is humming, he thinks. The girl is humming. His eyes drink in the sight, memorizing it. Control, his mind whispers, the merchant woman knows it well.

(Chiyo watches from a distance, and her aged heart beats painfully inside her chest. The image of a redheaded boy wrapped tight in a loving embrace drags up memories she would rather not dwell on.)

Rasa, knowing the situation no longer calls for him, turns on his heel and leaves. There is nothing to be done here. The merchant is safe, his son is drifting, and his guards are in place. Watching any longer is useless, and will gain him nothing but a strange bitter hollowness inside his chest. So he steps outside, and he waits. He stands outside in the raging winds and dust, clearing his mind as his robes swirl and snap around him. His eyes slit, and he focuses on the strangeness in the storm, the odd, unfamiliar weight to it. Hours later, when the storm has quieted down and the winds have stopped sandblasting the world, he will be stunned to figure it out when something wet soaks into the top of his robe.

Around them, for the first time in a long while, it begins to rain in Sunagakure.

In the late afternoon, while his child and the woman sleep off an intense emotional encounter, there is chaos in the streets. Rain in the desert is not an oxymoron, contrary to most beliefs, but rarely does it come so far inland. More than that, it is often visible before it reaches the basin city, a thick wall of clouds on the horizon heralding its arrival. But those who have been around a very long time know that the first downward blast of air from a storm can sweep up debris and dust, causing a great wall of sediment to cloak the coming rain.

A blessing wrapped in a disguise, they call this weather phenomenon a habūb.

The people of Suna are quick to empty into the streets in startled delight. The rains will not last long, and for the short time they exist they will be heavy and hard, but it is a break from routine. Life in a desert means a constant search for water, a struggle to carve out a living from the barren lands. When it rains, it means rest from that struggle, if only for a short while.

Children clutter the quickly flooding streets, grasped tight by parents who know that even a small-scale flash flood can sweep away the unsuspecting. Men and women gather containers in mass, collecting the life-giving liquid to add it to their rations. Hard baked earth is washed with liquid sloping down the basin's walls, only an inch or two deep, but so much more than there was before. Peddlers and merchants stare at the sky in wonder, and smiles alight on stern, blank faces. They shout out prayers and noises of thanks as the water washes over them, soaking robes and submerging feet. The clouds open up, and the winds whip through, but life rains down, if only for a few minutes.

Inside an intricately patterned, out of the way warehouse, an old woman will stand in a doorway and looks out to the rain before turning her thoughtful gaze back inside, where a tired woman slumps over a child while they rest.

Ryuishi feels as if she has been put through the wringer. So much heavy emotion makes her feel super fucking tired, and so much attention leaves no room for her to fuck up.

Apparently the higher-ups of Suna have realized something about her. While the people are in a good mood after the brisk rain, even after days, the Council and Kazekage are in a right snit about something.

She has a sneaking suspicion it is her existence.

This suspicion is not unfounded. There are changes afoot, things shifting subtly. Things like her separation from Gaara after the initial contact. Neither of them wanted it, but Ryuishi knew her future contact with him relied on not only her guise, but her compliance with the local shinobi's demands. She had peppered him with kisses and love, curling his own hand around his sea-glass necklace like a promise. She would be back-for as long as she could, she would return to him.

She is under surveillance, which isn't new. What was new was the scale of it. Her belongings had been gone through, no doubts about it, and she could only be glad that she had such good precautions. She bets that they would have tried to go through her bag as well if it wasn't on her person. Things were being checked, and names were being taken. She could see it in the ANBU guard that shadowed her every step, and the keen eyes that followed her around. Strangers, people who only shared a few words before now, were subtly acting more friendly. Shinobi and kunoichi, she hypothesizes, attempting to draw her in. The first attempt at building ties to hold her here. Soft encouragements for her to put in roots.

Ryuishi knows that when she leaves, there will be alerts from Kagami and her network that there has been probes on her paperwork, probably more thorough than before. She expects they will ask around for her friends and family in Rice, her business partners in River. Now more than ever, she has to act normal. Act harmless and unaware.

They will find the same construct as before. The same flawlessly forged paperwork, the same airtight alibi. The Mumei never liked nosiness, and even questions from those in disguise will fall short. Ryuishi made sure of it. She made sure of it before she began her very first expedition into the desert.

They will find Risa, an orphan of the Third Shinobi War, who lost her brothers in a crossfire between opposing forces, and gained her scars in that same conflict. Risa, who is lucky to be alive, who has every reason to dislike violence, who enjoys traveling and talking to

people. Risa, who can be awkward and brash, but knows how to find the best materials for her employers, who has a sweet tooth a mile wide.

Suna will not find Ryuishi, who knows she is being tested, being watched. She will remain hidden behind smiles and light chatter about how surprising everything is. They will not find her in those companionable, if awkward meetings with the probing, disguised shinobi. Ryuishi will give in to their plans, or at least seem to. She will go head first into the tests, use all the right words, and be scared of them just enough. She will maneuver this maze, because Gaara is waiting on the other side.

She knows they are using her, but she forgives them, because she has been using them as well.

After three days, she is still singing their song, playing their tune, and no one notices the missive she passes a man with hawk feathers in his hair. After a week, she is still dancing the right steps, showing her dependence by legally renewing her visit visa in order to be there when needed. After two weeks, she says just the right things to the right people, exposing false weaknesses so no one notices the serpent in her shower-drain holding her reports to Orochimaru in its throat.

It's hard. She almost avoids those plants trying to draw her in, because she knows what they are, but that would be suspicious. She wants to say stuff like 'fuck off' every time they subtly interject what they most like about Suna into conversation, or feed her false charm. She wants to scream because her skin itches with the weight of so many eyes, and she is so angry, so raw after everything.

There is no hiding from it. There is no leaving. If she goes, not only does she leave Gaara in a very fragile state, but Suna sees her as flaky. And yet, it pays off, because after sixteen days, Gaara is suddenly miraculously allowed near her again. Whether it is a reward for his good behavior, or for her own, she does not know. She only knows that her hard work and patience are rewarded.

She is escorted in, and the old woman is there again, smiling her hag smile. She doesn't dislike the woman, honest, Ryuishi just feels incredibly stressed. When she is stressed, she lashes out. It happens.

"Obaa-sama," she greets, forcing a cheerful grin on her face.

"Risa-san," the old woman acknowledges. Holding her hand is a sullen-looking Gaara, his eyes sunken and his mouth set in a hard line. He looks as tired as she feels. She would probably look just as ragged as him if it wasn't for heavy makeup and gratuitous abuse of beauty products.

"Will you be joining us today?"

The old woman nods, and Ryuishi wants to snarl. Of course they want to observe her interactions with Gaara from now on. Of fucking *course* .

"There more the merrier," she chirps, and she reaches out for the redheaded boy, who clambers towards her. She scoops him up, and he rests his head on her shoulder.

Ryuishi turns on her heel, setting the pace for today by ignoring the old woman's existence. She may be just doing her job, but the missing-nin is sick to death of playing games without rest. The boy is safe in her arms, and she won't waste the time she has with him.

"Hey Outoto, feeling better yet?" she whispers, her eyes darting around. The village is still riding its high, and the trade caravan is coming back today. She wants none of this. She wants isolation and peace, away from the bumbling masses.

He shakes his head without words and she coos, rubbing his back.

"That's okay. You have a right to feel that way," she breathes quietly, keeping her voice low so she won't be overheard. She knows that it

will look like she is murmuring sweet nothings in his ear, nurturing and matronly. Image is important now.

"You stayed," he mumbles into her neck.

It's true, she put off her plotting while she dealt with this. That's what the missives were for, the snakes and letters. Kagami and Orochimaru know where she is, and they know she cannot be bothered for a while. It put a bit of a strain on the system, and the Clan members with the Mumei have to be a little more active in her absence to make up for her lack of scouting and defense, but it is nothing they can't handle. Information is still being collected and her people are still protected.

Hatake might be losing his shit, though. He is pretty out of the 'need to know' loop.

"You needed me," she replies.

He clutches her tighter.

"Settle down, I'm not going anywhere, not for another month at least," she murmurs. It will kill her, yes. This ruse is exhausting, but he is a child, and he needs her.

"Sing," he orders, and she smiles genuinely for the first time since coming.

"How about asking politely?"

He growls, which is new. The way he grips her shirt tighter, digging his nails in and stretching the fabric is also new. Ryuishi knows this change, knows that his demons lie closer to the surface now, whispering in his ear.

That's fine, she is familiar with monsters and demons.

"Gaara," she croons, "Stay with me here. What's going on?"

"My head... it-" he shakes his head, unable to finish. She can feel Chiyo's gaze on her, so Ryuishi keeps smiling, keeps rubbing Gaara's back. Nothing wrong here, nothing to see.

The Ichibi, she thinks. Shukaku, the out-of-control teenager of the bijuu. The one with a bad case of the murders and poisoning children's mental stability, brought out by trauma and fear.

"I'll sing for it too," she offers, "You both can pick a song."

She can feel his body freeze, and his sea foam green eyes search her face when he leans back.

"If you say please. No little brother of my is going to be a rude shit," she says, before reconsidering her statement. " *To me*, no little brother is going to be rude *to me* . That counts for everything attached as well."

He keeps staring, and she smiles for him, and probably to throw Chiyo off her tail as well. She knows that insane ball of chakra and rage is there, she won't ignore it, but she also refuses to give up. If some pesky, rabid little force of nature wants to try and make her hate the little boy, or fear him, it can eat her entire ass.

She blinks and halts, recognizing the errant thought as pushing a little too far. She's gonna chalk it up to lack of sleep.

"And, if you want, we can build sand castles or catch lizards. Maybe play catch."

The boy blinks, and he seems to think on something for a bit. His features ease up and smooth out into his stoic mask, and he loosens his grip. Which, honestly, is great because for some reason, half a shirt still cost the same amount as a full one.

"Sing," he says again, settling into her arms. "Please?"

She smiles and presses a kiss to the crown of his head. They can get through this.

Ryuishi croons softly for him, and the monster, and maybe a little for herself as well.

A month passes, and eventually, she is ready to leave. In the eyes of the people watching her, she is nervous and regretful at the same time. It's easy to play the regretful part, because she will miss Gaara, and she wishes she could do more. Nervousness is harder to feign, but still easy to display.

She was allowed twelve more days with Gaara in the forty seven she stayed. Fourteen days in total of reassurance and comfort among his renewed training and acclimatization to his new routine. Fourteen days of trying to allow him time to grieve while others told him to repress. Fourteen days of attempting to nurse him back to health, shoving food and water in him at every opportunity. Fourteen days of trying her best to heal a wounded little boy, and sooth the bijuu whispering in his head. Fourteen days of light in her life out of forty-seven acting the fool in the darkness.

Not enough, not near enough.

It will have to do, because if she remains any longer, she is insinuating that she would remain here, if given the option too. As in permanent relocation. Not only that, but any real merchant would already be facing unemployment for such a long absence.

They allow Gaara to see her off, under the watchful eyes of Chiyo.

She kneels down for him and opens her arms for the last time this trip. He takes advantage of it without prompting, which is progress.

"Stay safe?" she asks.

He nods into her shoulder, and she knows his emotionless mask is up. It has never been more perfect than after his uncle's betrayal. Anger burns tightly in her chest, before she smothers it yet again.

"Come back," he whispers.

She kisses his forehead again and hugs him tighter for a moment.

"As long as I am able," she promises.

He clutches tighter for a moment, and she swallows back something unnamed. It's guilt and regret, mixed with rage and bone deep tiredness.

"I love you," she reminds him. He doesn't say anything to that, but he doesn't need to. It will be alright. She has to believe that.

Ryuishi lets him go and ruffles his hair once more before turning to the exit gate. She's already been cleared by security. Step by step she leaves Sunagakure behind her, and little by little she begins to unravel. Stress eats at her, and lack of sleep makes her thoughts slow. Her stomach is in knots, and she knows she should eat, but the thought of food makes her physically ill. She needs decompression, time away, time to process what has happened. She needs an outlet.

As she finally reaches the point where she can travel with chakra, she considers Hatake. It takes her a moment, but she considers the amount of questions he would ask, and having to lie so much would just aggravate her exhaustion. Not only that, but she feels like having to sneak into Konoha right now would be more work than she is willing to do.

Orochimaru is out because she doesn't want to look at his face right now. She owes him a favor for informing her, and they both know it.

Kagami sounds like hell.

What, she asks herself, bounding across stones and sand, will help me de-stress and simultaneously help me get rid of pent up emotions, and maybe lead to sleep?

Ryuishi goes over memories of her past, both in this life and the last. What has she always done when there is no one to trust, and too much stress in her life? The answer comes in many different forms, and she carefully chooses the one that sounds the most appealing. A hot bath and booze, that's how she'll deal with this. First she'll go the Land of Hot Water, then she'll meet with Kagami to deal with whatever needs dealing, then Konoha, then home. That sounds right.

Right?

Hidan watches people stalk the evening, a sneer on his face. He wouldn't be in such a horrible mood if it wasn't for the people around him.

"This is bullshit," he declares, yet again.

The bar is smoky and dark, not to mention packed full of heathens. The music is just loud enough to be extremely fucking annoying, and the chatter around the room is a dull roar that makes his head hurt.

"Why the fuck am I here again?" he demands.

The man beside him rolls his eyes and takes a long drink from the bottle in front of him. "Because as your friend, I decided you need to get out more."

Hidan has no idea how this asshole got it in his head that they were friends, or why he is here right now. This seedy, barely legal bar is a den of sin, and there is no point to it existing. It is an affront in the face of his Lord.

He clutches at the rosary around his neck and murmurs a prayer. Killing his commanding officer would likely land him in prison, no matter how satisfying it would be to watch the life drain out of the fucker's eyes.

The man who dragged him here simply snorts and goes to take another drink. Hidan wishes he would go to the missions office and take a mission instead. He would do it himself, but bureaucracy is bullshit, more bullshit than waiting the two days it will take for the man beside him to sober up and get on with it.

Something twinges in the back of his head, catching him off guard. The bar is full of weak, pitiful chakra signatures. People he wouldn't waste the time of day to slaughter. Half of these people are criminals, and they should be ashamed. There is something odd approaching, though, something smothered down and hidden. It feels like the temple, empty and hungry at the same time.

Hidan looks up from sneering at the fuck beside him. He feels for it again, amongst the shitty and powerless chakra signatures around him. There is someone new, which he would write off. Tourists and assholes came around all the time to his village, and she certainly looks one, coming in fresh from the hot springs and the cold of winter outside.

He watches with curiosity as she picks her way across the room, and he searches her for it. Again, hidden and smothered he can barely detect it, but she is only half a room away from him, and though it isn't common knowledge, he is a fairly average sensor.

The nameless anomaly makes her way up to the bar and flags down the man behind it. He watches her, reading the words off her lips. "*Just fuck me up,*" she orders, sliding across the cash.

"I'd fuck you," the person beside her offers in a much louder voice.

The look she gives the fucker is nothing short of deadly, and he watches as something flashes behind empty coal eyes, violent and

spiteful. He is disappointed when she turns away and does nothing. There is promise there, he can fucking see it. He wants to egg it on.

"Hey, shithead," he calls, turning toward his companion, "I'm going over there to do the Lord's work."

The man gives him a wide eyed glance, before looking over to where the white haired man is jerking his thumb. He smirks. "Didn't know you had it in you," he says offhandedly.

Hidan scowls. "Go fuck yourself. Next time I see you, there'd better be a mission in your hand."

With his farewells finished, he makes his way over to the bar where the stranger is currently throwing back shots from a bottle of rice whiskey like it's going out of style.

(To be fair, she did take a bath and sleep first. It didn't help the stress, so she thought, hey, why not? It's The Land of Hot Water, people come here expressly to get fucked up. That's how tourism here works. It's almost like a tamer Asian Vegas. That snows. Nice Asian Vegas with winter snow.)

She is cocking her head back to swallow her drink when he spies the long, jagged scar traversing her throat, and then the ones poking out from her pants and under her shirt. Those are killing blows, all three. He's even more curious than before.

"Hey, you with-" he begins.

She slams the cup on the counter, cutting him off. "Buddy," she drawls without looking at him, "If you're lookin' for a quick lay, you better look elsewhere."

He sneers and slides into the stool next to her, gently tossing the man from before out of it. There is a squawk, and the man blusters before taking in the headband around his neck and skulking off.

"I ain't into that kind of shit," he tells her, bringing his eyes back around.

"Good, because I would rather-"

She turns lazily to look at him, and she freezes mid-sentence. There is a moment of quiet, and he almost chalks it up to her noticing his headband as well before she laughs, low and maybe a little unhinged.

"What the fuck is so funny?"

She pours herself another glass, peeling her eyes away from him, still laughing. Maybe it was his stunning good looks. Jashin did bless him with a wonderful visage.

"I," she declares, "am not yet drunk enough to fucking deal with you."

"Drinking is a fucking sin," he informs her, and he kinda likes the bitter, angry smile she gives him.

"Have you ever tried it, or did some puffed up priest tell you that?"

He balks. That's blasphemy, she can't just insult a priest! "Watch your fucking mouth," he bites out, and to his surprise, she raises her hands in defeat.

"No disrespect to your religion meant," she offers, "I'm just not sure about the organized religion thing in general."

His violet eyes take on a near manic gleam. He is suddenly fucking certain he was meant to be here. This woman needs to hear the word, and damn if he isn't the one to tell her it. "Then let me have the fucking privilege of telling you about the glory of Jashin," he says.

She looks like she's mulling over it for a moment before she slides the cup over to him. "I'll listen, if you drink with me," she offers back.

Hidan eyes the cup. The Lord will permit this if he is drawing a member into the flock. He looks up at her empty eyes, and feels that hungry abyss deep inside of her, sitting inside her like a glorious promise. He throws the shot back, and then coughs and sputters because it burns like liquid fire down his throat. The suffering draws him closer to God.

"So the first thing you fucking need to know, is that right now, you are a godless heathen who..."

She smiles, and he talks, and both of them drink. Time passes, not that they notice. Sitting down, it's a bit harder to tell how much they have been drinking, but the background noise fades and the edges of sensation blur.

"Wait, let me get this straight," she halts, rubbing her hand over her face and attempting to focus her vision. No dice. They've been here for at least two hours, and she is well and truly wrecked.

"Fucking go for it," he slurs at her, and she wants to laugh. She's no heavyweight drinker, but neither is he. On the drunk scale, they are pretty intoxicated, after maybe six or seven shots each. Makes drinking cheaper, at least.

"Suffering lets us taste despair, and binds us closer because we understand more after we have suffered?" she starts, unsure. "And pain brings us closer to enlightenment, because the pain we feel is the sensation of sin leaving us?"

"Yeah-wait. Fuck. No. Pain through *ritual* is sin leaving the body. If you fucking stub your toe, shit's meaningless," he answers.

"Alright. I get that there is shit you can understand only after you have gone through it, but, like, what's the fucking point of murdering people again?"

He grunts and reaches out to lay his hand on her shoulder, which is weird, but okay. He looks her in the eyes, dead serious as a man can

get. "We're fuckin' ninja," he tells her, "Ninja kill people. If people are dead, we are doing our jobs right. Civilians do paperwork. They grow things and make things. They lead stuff, like the daimyo. Ninja fuck shit up. It's what we were made to do. Fighting is good, it's fucking holy."

"I never said I was a fucking ninja," she rebukes, unconcerned. Who the fuck is going to believe this guy if he narcs? No one, that's who. Plus, she's fairly certain half the people in this bar are missing-nin on vacation or some shit. She wouldn't have shown up in this shithole as she was if that wasn't so.

He snorts, and ends up coughing again, his hand retracting from her shoulder. What a majestic asshole.

"Piss off, I could be... ah... uh..." she starts, attempting to think, "A chef. Yah. I cook food, you asshole."

His head rolls and he gives her this dumb fucking look, and she bristles.

"Don't be a dick. I can make food right now, you just fucking watch. I can make shit," she says, probably a little defensive.

He leans over the table, and she is struck with the sudden urge to make his face stay still. If she can just... hold it there. Make it stop blurring.

"I bet your cooking tastes like piss," he slurs.

"I bet you taste like piss," she returns wittily. "I mean, you certainly look like shit."

Nice save, she tells herself as her brain sloshes inside her skull. *This was a great idea.*

"You're a ninja," he assures her. "Scars and muscles, they can come from other shit, yeah, but your chakra is all... smothered and hard to

find."

Ryuishi pauses, tiny ceramic glass halfway to her mouth.

"That's it though, there something inside it. It's like... like big and shit. Like a battlefield, or a ritual. It's hungry," he tells her, and his eyes are glassy and his speech muddled, but it strikes her like a blow to the chest.

"Shut up," she whispers.

He continues. "It's fucking great. It's a blessing-"

"Shut the fuck up," she says again.

"-It's like you've been touched by Jashin, and you don't even see it," he continues.

Ryuishi lurches up off of the stool, and the world slips sideways. Noise fills her head like static on a TV, and she has to focus on balancing as she stumbles away from him. The smoke and the dim lighting don't seem comforting anymore, they don't seem fun. So she makes her way to the bar's exit, staggering the whole way. Somebody shouts behind her, but she keeps going, out the door and past the road, and into the maze of slurry-filled alleyways around her.

Ryuishi feels something like brittle shards of glass in her lungs, and she can't tell if it's from the cold air or her own panic. She's dead, and she's fucked up. She's killed people, and people have tried to kill her. Zabuza and Kisame are nowhere near where she needs them to be, and Naruto is slipping away. Gaara needs a grief counselor but is getting murder training. Kakashi and Orochimaru want to use her, and she wants her mom and dad and little sister. Everything is too big, too much.

Fuck that dude for bringing this shit up.

Everything is blurry, and she's drunk and just wants to relax, but now she's simultaneously pissed beyond belief and sad as fuck.

"Shit-" somebody calls, followed by the sound of crates falling, "Fuck, wait up! Bitch, wait up!"

"Eat a bag of dicks!" she shouts, tripping over her own awkwardly-placed foot.

"Fuck you!"

"Fuck your mother!"

"Leave her out of this!"

She makes a turn, down another alley, and slips in a patch of ice. Her world shifts and splashes, and she can almost feel the liquid inside her skull. She is overcome by the sudden urge to dry heave.

Hidan goes to make the same turn and trips over her, launching himself into a pile of garbage. He takes a moment for the buildings to stop moving around him, and maybe re-orient himself before he turns to view the woman on all fours, hunched up and making retching noises. Her chakra is peeking out, and he lets it wash over him. He thinks that she was concealing it, which is a crying fucking shame, because it's numbing and awe-inspiring.

"What the hell was that?" he asks, tilting himself on the surprisingly comfortable garbage bags. Man, this brings him back. He would have literally killed to find an alleyway this nice when he was a kid.

Her head snaps up, and he is fucking happier than a Kumo-nin with a stray Hyuuga. She's fucking *pissed*, and if he's ever seen a violent look, it's now. "Shut up!"

He smiles, and she snarls like some monster out of a nightmare. He is so excited, because yes, this is what Jashin wants. She isn't a

sheep, or a crow, or a dog. This stranger with death in her soul is *destruction* . He wants to see it.

"Fuckin' show me!" he demands.

"I'll peel your fuckin' skin inch by inch off your miserable lil' body and shove needles in every nerve, shut up shut up SHUT UP!"

He laughs, and she lunges at him. That chakra of hers washes off him, and he revels in it. It wants to maim, it wants to *hurt* . It leaks out, little by little, even as she tries to smother it. The booze lessens her control, but her desperation ties it down.

Hidan has never felt so alive.

He blocks her kick, but her fist smashes into his skull, slamming him into the wall beside him. It's a sloppy hit, and he's glad for it. This woman has a wicked right hook, and he doesn't fancy a dislocated jaw. Pain blossoms, bright and consuming inside his temple. He reaches for it, tries to focus his chakra, but the liquor makes it impossible. He guesses it goes for her as well, because even though it is leaking through the air, surging into his senses, he isn't dead.

He reaches up and grabs a fistful of hair, yanking it back even as something cuts into his palms. She yowls wordlessly, and he can feel nails dragging down his cheek, reaching for his eyes. He lifts his knee and slams it into her gut. She chokes, and spit dribbles out of her mouth.

Life, he thinks. *This is life*.

She lifts her hands away from his face. He dodges the elbow to the throat, but the punishing back-fist to the inside of his arm forces him to let go of her hair. The world around them spins, and their movements are clumsy from the alcohol, but they are vicious nonetheless.

She leans down, her mouth open like she's going to tear out his throat, and he slams his aching head into her nose. She rolls with the blow, tumbling off of him and onto the alley floor while he scrabbles for purchase, trying to haul himself up. The stranger, wild and angry, tucks herself into a crouch, and they wait. He can feel warm liquid leaking from her scratches, and a bruise forming on his temple and cheek. Her nose drips crimson steadily down her face.

Pumped and ready, he shouts a war cry in her face. Her broken voice cries one right back.

They lunge.

It is some sort of terrible joy, beating each other with nothing else but what the good Lord gave them. By some unspoken rule, there are no weapons or jutsu; just fists and elbows, feet and legs, teeth and claws. It's holy and pure.

He thinks things would be different if she was thinking about it, instead of bodily attempting to rip him apart while also trying to not be so drunk. There would have been serious repercussions, and even without chakra or tools, she constricts around him like a snake, choking his breath from him. He jabs an elbow in her ribs, loosening her hold before he slips out. His own torso screams in divine agony. She probably broke something. He wants more. He wants it all, every bit she can give him.

Ryuishi doesn't think. She just moves, terrible in her anger and sorrow. There is something horribly nostalgic about this brutality, about howling with somebody as they draw blood.

There is something that is freeing about it as well. She doesn't know how long they go on, or where it ends. She only knows there is pain, on her abs and her face. Nothing broken, she hopes.

She starts crying somewhere for a bit as well, which will be embarrassing later, but he squealed like a stuck pig, so it's totally fair.

She pants, and across from her he does the same, his neck bleeding and face swelling. She takes a vindictive pleasure in it, but more than that, there is something like peace inside her, found through violence and blood.

"You good?" he asks, and she watches scarlet trail down his torso.

"I'm good," she slurs, tired. "You good?"

"I'm good."

He collapses, knees giving out, and falls back into the garbage. Ryuishi fumbles after him, her weight suddenly too much to bear, and her mind still drowning in Lao-Lao. She thinks that maybe she might not understand the murdering, or the shared suffering of Jashinism, but she gets this. She gets it now.

"Something pure about a fight," she breathes, closing her eyes.
"Something holy."

"Yeah," he answers.

"Yeah."

Stars shining overhead, in some Yugakure alleyway, Ryuishi succumbs to unconsciousness.

AN: So here's some stuff. Uhm, I mean, there's a trickle effect going on here, and most of it is plot important. Cept for Hidan. He just kind of wound up here. I'm not sure how that viscous, angry, guido got in this chapter, but here he is. I have the theory that since Hidan is a devout follower of a deity that demands destruction and death, he has a pretty good idea of what the fuck Ryuishi has inside her soul. He isn't immortal quite yet I think at this point either. I hope I wrote him alright, because it is hard to see how he was before he defected, and his reasons for... anything. Also, this is the beginning of some 'Ryuishi

handles stress poorly and shit keeps piling up', otherwise known as 'fuuuuuuck.' Double also, let me casually remind you that Ryuishi is not a great person.

Llyrica also wrote 'Shorty short' a flash fic on what Kakashi was thinking when Ryuishi left. I'm gonna count it as AWESOME. I also have chapters for SGU that I might just publish un-beta'd.

A big thank you to my fav-ers, my followers, and my readers. A gigantic warm hug for my reviewers, and OMG THANK YOU GUYS FOR REVIEWING, LOOK AT THOSE NUMBERS. I'M SORRY I'M TRASH AND DON'T RESPOND ALWAYS.

EVERYBODY THANK ENBI FOR THIS EXTRA FAST UPDATE. They are the one who pushed this, and also spent forever with me, discussing Hidan. Go read her Hidan, because he's spot on and I love him, and I want to write his character half as well as she does. ENBI IS BEST BETA.

Question: "I didn't want this, I never fucking planned it. I just wanted to be friends, but after everything we've been through-" says Ryuishi. Who is she talking to, and what is she trying to say? OR Please send me your pairings for this fic, be it OTP or OT3 or OT(number here) and justify your reasoning. Sell me your ships. Give me some feels. For reasons.

Meeting an Unraveling

I do not own Naruto.

Ryuishi wakes not too long after crashing down, her face shoved into the iced-over plastic skin of a trash bag, her nose stuffed with dried and flaking blood. The world spins around her, and she knows she's still drunk, but the worst has yet to come.

She peels herself off of the garbage, noting how familiar it smells, how the stench of decay, the blood in her nostrils, and the biting cold brings her back to her years in Kirigakure. There is an ache in her stomach where she knows a bruise will form. She is almost intimately familiar with them by now, purple-blues and green-yellows staining her skin.

She pushes herself off the trash, and takes in her environment for a moment. The white-haired man is still on his side, crashed out for good. She thinks that if she killed him now she would save herself a headache in the future.

Ryuishi looks away from his prone form, and something tries to swim up from the depths of rice whiskey and pain. Not her place, not her judgement, it tries to justify. But when she stumbles away, she knows that's a lie. She's just too tired to give a proper fuck.

The missing-nin goes to the inn, even though her bag is on her back, and makes sure there isn't a trace of her presence in the room. She drinks probably a full gallon of water in a desperate attempt to stave off the horrible aftereffects of a binge, and showers quicker than she has before. Her chakra is coating that alleyway, and she probably flared it pretty bad in her little drunken temper tantrum turned brawl. Too much evidence pointing towards her. She needs to get away.

Ryuishi leaves Yugakure in the middle of the night, only stopping to buy a pair of sunglasses to stave off the coming light of day, very glad that they both acted like idiots and could not find their balance for the life of them.

As noon rolls around, she's camped out in the foothills near Kumo, vomiting her guts out into a ravine, wishing she had stayed in her hotel for this shit. She always got the worst fucking hangovers from Lao-Lao. She doesn't know why she thought that would change, because it obviously fucking hasn't.

She blinks behind her sunglasses and prays for relief she knows she won't find. Her head is a miserable mess of pressure and pain, and her entire digestive system is rebelling against existence. There's no after parties, no housemates, no friends to hold her hair or rub her back. There is the goddamn wind and some fucking trees to witness her debilitating, full-body wreck.

Somewhere, an eagle cries out.

She hurls, bile and water rising up her throat and exploding past her lips. Her whole body cramps and cries out.

Her hand snakes out for more water. She knows if she doesn't have something to expel, the symptoms will only get progressively more horrific. The candy in her bag was worthless, as well as the scrolls. Only a sad, dry as fuck ration bar was there to nibble on.

She feels terrible, but there is no stopping. That white-haired ass had a point when he ranted last night. There is something relieving about fighting, something calming in the violence. It's just too bad that last night's tipsy brawl wasn't what she would consider a fight anymore.

She hikes up the mountain at a civilian's pace, and guesses that it is probably for the best. As she stands now, a real fight would include heavy, heavy damage. Property would be destroyed, bodies pushed to the brink, and shit would get real. Nothing says 'hey, look at me' like her idea of a good tussle, and she can't afford to be noticed.

Still, it leaves her simultaneously irritated and forlorn. Irritated because she would love a fight, and she won't get one, and forlorn because she knows that it is probably the most unhealthy way to rid herself of pent up stress, and also because she fucked up pretty bad with the drinking bit. She could have been caught, could have been killed. Taking her mood into account, she could have been the fucking killer. She can't afford that kind of slip up, not when there is so much work to be done. As fun as boozing it up was, it's not going to solve her problems, and it's not going to help her state of mind.

Ryuishi finishes off her ration bar and stuffs the wrapper in a side pocket. She wants to analyze the previous night's actions and find out where she went wrong. Popping a piece of minty gum in her mouth to rid herself of after-vomit flavor, she tries to pinpoint where she could have done better, with everything. Should she have stayed with Gaara? Should she risk spending more time with Naruto? Should she have told Zabuza and Kisame the truth from the get go? Stayed in Kiri? Been a whore? Left the Mumei? Broke the world? Let it burn?

Her head pounds, and she pops her gum, pushing her sunglasses back up her face. It doesn't matter. What's done is done, and no matter what she might feel about it, no matter what she might think, shit isn't going to change.

She's just got to be better.

With that comforting thought, and a massive hangover, she makes her way to the brothel with zero fucks left. When she slips inside and girls scamper to alert Kagami, she ignores them. She is tired and sick, and she wants this to be done. She wants to know what's what, and how much shit has changed in her absence. She ascends the stairs, her gaze level and flat, her posture languid and lethal. With no aplomb, she slides the door open to the upper room and walks in like she owns the damn place. In a way, she kind of does.

Kagami looks up from examining a bunch of forms, most likely orders for the workers, and takes her appearance in. For a moment

she looks bewildered before she sends her a look that could chill lava.

"What happened?" she demands. " You look like-"

"Kagami," Ryuishi interrupts, deadpan. "Reports."

The old woman casts her eyes on the young missing-nin, looking for that warmth she usually carries, those soft spots she leaves open. She finds none. She does not know what happened in Suna, or where the girl went after, but it looks like weariness has stripped her down and left her like this. The woman notes that the missing-nin is not only bruised but has lost weight as well.

There are times when she knows she can weasel in jibes and disrespectful comments. She knows that now is not one of them. She turns and motions to the man sitting outside her room, who is looking at the Rakki Ryu with concern and awe. He nods in understanding and sets out to get tea. It will be a long day if this is the mood she is in.

"In your absence, the traveling bands did well to keep up security. There are some reports of them being perhaps a little too callus with some locals, but-"

The girl's dark eyes flash, and Kagami knows it will cease to be an issue soon. "Names and whereabouts," the girl demands.

Kagami goes to pull out a pen and paper. She has a feeling there will need to be a list.

They go over everything, and she does mean *everything*.

"Schools in Kusa are gaining popularity, and literacy rates are up. Some could use shipments of-"

"-the new crops are in, and alongside rice they have decided to plant soy as well to supplement-"

"-the Stone Daimyo's second cousin had an affair, which will be good fodder if we want-"

"-Ame continues to seal off its borders, and informants are advised to stay well away-"

"-new trader added to the list of those dealing with Fire. Favors dried goods, bases out of-"

Kagami rattles on, and Ryuishi wants to faceplant into her tea. Good lord, she is tired. She wishes her headache would just quit it already.

"Alright," she interjects, and Kagami stops talking. Finally. She thinks on the information given for a moment, and she can feel the tangible burning in her brain as she plots out different paths and options for her to choose from. She would linger on them, but damn does she feel hungover.

"I'll deal with the splinter group in Shimo. It sounds like they're just taking the 'Everyone matters' to mean that every Mumei matters. That's fine, I'll set them straight and remind them where their roots are. With Kusa's growing education, we can expect to see some innovation there and some trouble for the local rulers. I want the clan groups to keep an eye out for instability and report back. There's a chance we can take advantage of it, but it's more likely to lead to small outbursts of violence in some time. Add to that predatory behavior on those still uneducated, and it's a real fucking hassle. Watch out for land grabs and civilians grouping together in secret meetings," she mutters, her hand sliding up to rub at her eyes. She's still wearing sunglasses, everything is too bright even though evening has come.

"Understood," the old matron replies with a respectful nod.

"If we can, we'll try to distract them for now. Kusa's main staple is crops and livestock, right?"

Kagami shuffles through her mind, and then some forms in front of her. "There is also a construction base there, as well as a pharmaceutical centered crops. They dabble in manufacturing as well, but not as much as Fire."

Ryuishi nods and closes her eyes. "Plant some books on physiology and anatomy in the next shipments of paper and ink. Start with agricultural bases. Selective breeding could boost the meat market in a few years. They have a problem with Bluetongue in the goats and sheep, correct?"

"Yes. Mortality rates are high."

"Add some books that contain information on disease carrying insects, quarantine, and vaccinations."

"Those will be... hard to come by."

"Not if you look in the archives of the Rice Daimyo. Use one of the girls, or if that goes poorly, inform him that we have evidence of some unsavory behavior of his daughter. I would ask Orochimaru, but he's deep in some shit right now," Ryuishi replies. She actually doesn't want to ask Orochimaru because she already is in his debt for his information, and she won't dig that hole any deeper. Not that there is an actual debt, because they are partners and he knows this will benefit him in time. It's more like she needs a gift to give him, to show that she recognizes he went that extra step. Positive reinforcement and all that.

"Tomorrow we can go over the prices of weaponry for the clan members. With Suna trading alloys again, prices are sure to drop a bit. I'm going to bed," she announces.

Kagami nods once as Ryuishi gets up to her feet. She still feels like crap, and it's too long for it to be a hangover. Maybe she's getting sick? It's probably stress. She doesn't know which one, or whether to care or not. In the end, she just eats a bowl of rice and heads to the

room she's given. Her stomach won't handle anymore, and she's too fucking tired to bathe, which is new.

It takes her forever to fall asleep. The futon is stiff and uncomfortable beneath her, and the wooden neck rest is absolute bullshit. She stares out into the darkness of the room and goes over her memories again and again. *Mom, dad, sister, brothers. New life, Kisame, Zabuza, Gaara, Naruto.*

She closes her eyes and tries to think of her favorite memory, a beach with overcast skies. Her father fishing in the surf, her mother and sister playing in the sand, her brothers swimming far away. It melts, and she is cradled between Kisame and Zabuza on the middle of a lake as they check her for injury.

Then there are hands, unwanted on her body. There are a hundred broken corpses, so small and lifeless. There is war, white phosphorus raining down and eating her skin, steel biting into her flesh. There is struggle, and then there is loneliness. There are lies and lies, responsibilities and expectations. Regrets that go bone deep.

Ryuishi finally falls asleep, and for some reason, she dreams of temples echoing with prayers whispered in her voice.

Three days later, three ninja gather in Shimo, the Land of Frost. A small country that shares its borders with The Land of Lightning and the Land of Hot Water.

It was supposed to be a simple A-rank mission, Kakashi laments to himself. Just simple surveillance on a splinter cult in Shimo, rumored to have association with the Rakki Ryuu.

He should have known better, he thinks. Nothing is ever simple with Watanabe Ryuishi.

It has been months since he last saw her. Months of speculating what, exactly, had triggered her raw, unfiltered aggression. Months of hoping he had done right in showing her out of the village in a gamble to lessen collateral damage. Months of wondering if he had failed as her handler.

Now, cloaked in his mission gear, the snow falling around him and Tenzo, who is stiff from shock, he wonders those same things. He wonders if he has overestimated her, or if he has underestimated her.

She looks like a caricature of herself-or is the one he normally sees the portrait? She stands in front of the group they were told to survey, and she looks like royalty, like stone, unmoving in her judgement.

The cult itself is no laughing matter either. There are bloodline users, rogues from the Fall of Kiri, from clans that aren't supposed to exist anymore. He knows there were rumors, but this undeniable evidence is still hard to take in.

"You chose us!" the blue-haired woman protests. Behind her, a woman with long white hair watches on, her red brows furrowed together. Three young teens watch on, staring at Watanabe like a legend come to life. Behind them, even more watch, some some obviously clan, some undetermined.

"I gave you a choice, " the black haired woman corrects. Her tone is warm and understanding, but her eyes are tired and cold. Kakashi remembers her already cool touch, and wonders how she is not shivering. Probably by willpower alone.

"Then we chose you! I was just following you, your teachings-" the woman attempts, but Watanabe steps forward. Her footsteps don't make a sound.

"I understand. I do. An honest mistake," she demurs. Even her husky voice is different. Smooth and melodious. A leader's voice. "You are

important. Every single one of you. I cannot thank you enough for your faith in me. I know it has been hard, that you are used to a higher standard of living. I hope I have reciprocated your faith, and supplied you well."

"We owe our lives to you," the white haired woman states. Kaguya, there is no doubt about it. "Our lives, and our children's lives. Our futures. You have given us food, clothes, and work-"

"They dishonored your name!" the blue haired woman interrupts. "They called you whore lover, they said you were scum, a bitch and a harlot. They spat at your shine!"

"You are important," Watanabe reiterates, louder this time. "That does not mean that others are not. If they reject me, if they mock me, if they dishonor my name, that is their choice."

The others fall silent, and something heavy hangs in the air. Kakashi recognizes it at her unmistakable chakra, hungry and tainted.

"Not everyone will love us. Not everybody will understand. Not everybody is Mumei. They will do terrible things, cruel things, but that does not mean you are allowed to do the same," she states, and he cannot deny the charisma she oozes. So sympathetic, so humble. If he was in their place, he doesn't know what he would do. This is why their smear campaign against her is failing. She doesn't demand retribution, she doesn't deny rumors. She doesn't need to. She has to actively work to keep them from fighting those who spread them.

"You came from hard places, you have seen struggle, you know fear. You overcame, and you are my people. I am proud to call you that. Not everyone chose me though, not everybody will choose me. You have to accept that," she asks, and the teens look gobsmacked by this revelation.

"I gave you a choice, and you chose me. For that I will always try to lead you well, but you have to respect when others make different choices. You may think that they are wrong, it might go against your

beliefs, but *it is their choice*," she states, and there is a sense of finality to it.

"Ryuu-hime, I don't understand," admits the blue haired woman, obviously frustrated and close to tears. Like some sort of myth, the missing nin goes to comfort her, her arms embracing the woman. He sees the Hōzuki stiffen, and he knows Watanabe must be as cold as ice.

For a moment she just stands there, comforting the leader of the cult, soothing her. The Hōzuki takes a deep breath, and shudders to lean against her.

"I'm not a Kage, or a Daimyo," she tells them, quieter, making them listen, "I'm not some noble or highborn. I don't want you to follow me like that, because I'm higher up in a social or political ladder. When you choose to follow me, it means that I am good enough to be yours. It means that you thought about it, and your choice means more because I earned it. Your loyalty is greater because you chose to give it, not because it was owed."

Unbelievable, he thinks. She's throwing away the system that has lasted as long as memory. She denies royalty, denies higher caste, denies servitude and honor. It's some sort of social contract, where they will follow her only if she leads them well. He can't tell if it's deception, manipulation, or honesty.

The Hōzuki clutches at her, and the Kaguya approaches warily. Watanabe gives them a warm smile that somehow rings false in his chest. Then there are tears, and comfort, and talking. He can't keep track of it all. If this is how she operates, then spreading rumors and misinformation isn't going to topple her empire. It's already solidifying, too sturdy to break, and it's only getting stronger.

Konoha can only hope to cut off those who aren't already hers and turn them towards the elemental nations once more. This has become less of a physical force they can fight with economic backlash, and more of a political arena with enormous

consequences in all areas. Kakashi doubts this is the only support she has, and this group is full of supposedly extinct bloodline users. There has to be more who didn't make the mistake of pushing the locals around. That's the reason Konoha was called, and then, and now-

Singing, and dancing. There's a whole culture here. From his hidden position, he can see plates of food. Roasted fish from the icy waters, braised eel from the warmer brooks. Root vegetables from beneath the snow. Women are comparing tips on style, subtly darting glances at Watanabe who is conversing with another group like a lady at court.

He follows their gaze.

On the surface she looks good, with proper posture and grace, but he knows her movements. Her joints are a little stiff, and there is a lack of life in her eyes. She's dropped weight, her muscles straining a little closer underneath the skin. Her chakra has lessened in intensity, but it is sluggish and vile. Slower, as if she is sick. Her lips are darker than usual, as if blue beneath the plum stain, and he is bewildered by the fact nobody notices how she keeps hiding her fingers and toes.

This is big, huge even. This isn't a small rebellion or slip in control. This a movement. These are a people. The only question is how far they have spread.

Tenzo is like stone beside him, and he worries. Her secret is out, through no fault of his own. How will she react? Will she cut ties with Konoha? Can she cut ties now? It's not their fault, they didn't know she would be here.

He licks his lips beneath his mask.

They watch as the night continues in the snowy clearing, fires hidden in small metal boxes and light reflected of shards of ice from a Yuki. They are hidden here. No ashes to find in the morning, carried away

in those contraptions. No trash to find, footprints hidden by the gently falling snow. He sees packets in hands, and he knows they are full of peppers that will cause noses to clog. At most there will be chakra, but even that will fade in a few days time, if the sensor can stomach Watanabe's polluted energy.

Watanabe leans over to the blue haired Hōzuki and whispers something he can't pick up. It's too quiet, and her lips are hidden by her hair. The woman nods in understanding. Later, he will berate himself for not watching closer, because they bed down, save for watchers. Watchers including Watanabe, who patrols relentlessly, pacing around like a caged animal. Several times she sweeps by them, as if driven by instinct, only to squint and back off again.

She doesn't sleep, even when he and Tenzo trade off on watch. The next morning, they are forced to make a choice. The main group is splitting up into several smaller ones, and Watanabe is separating from them as well.

"If we lose track of them, we won't get this chance again," Kakashi points out.

"If we follow Watanabe, we can find other groups. She's the leader here," Tenzo replies back. It's said with a hint of something unnameable, and he completely understands. He wouldn't have guessed that such a foul-mouthed, whiny, loud, mentally unstable woman could lead anything either.

In the end, the choice is made to follow Watanabe. Not only is she the bigger target, but she's also been silent for months. The others now have appearances to be recorded, to easier track them.

They watch as she flits through the snow, following at a distance. Away from watching eyes she starts shivering, hard. She leaps and bounds through the upper foothills, but mostly she seems to be following the flow of gravity. Her eyes dart about periodically, as if she can sense them watching her. She stumbles more than once.

They follow her for a whole day, and then a night. She hasn't slept once, hasn't stopped moving. It's a relentless pace. They follow her down to the borders of Snow Country, and to his chagrin, in the late winter months, the snow follows them across the borders, because the Land of Hot Water is covered in powder and ice. It wipes away at her exposed skin, and he notices her makeup fading. Her gut is bruised, and her eyes have bags underneath them. There are fading scratches and scrapes along her skin, and her sandals are starting to leave a scent. A faint coppery tang.

He's beginning to wonder if this relentless pace is some sort of strange suicide ritual when she finally stops inside a small alcove of trees near a river. She stands in a small clearing and spins around, dark eyes squinting.

"Alright, whoever is following me better damn well be a sexual fantasy come to life," she informs the chilly air.

They listen, hidden away.

"Because whoever you are, you've been riding my ass pretty hard since Shimo," she declares. "So come out already. My neck is itching like a bitch from being watched, and if we're gonna fight, we might as well get it over with."

(If she's going crazy and shouting into empty terrain, well, nobody has to know. Sort of like checking for potential telepaths in her old world. 'If you can hear my thoughts, scratch the back of your head and then rub your nose' sort of thing.)

Nobody answers her, and she cocks her jaw. "Okay, well, I guess I can just sit here and wait. Or maybe flood this whole area. Who wants an area-wide genjutsu? I'm feeling pretty bitchy," she remarks, rubbing her hands together and beginning to thread through seals. If nothing else, she can call this training.

Ryuishi is moments away from making good on her threats when two figures shunshin out of the trees. She fights down the urges to

continue the genjutsu anyway before she gets a good look at their masks.

"Oh fuck me," she sighs, dropping her hands and letting the chakra in her system flood back in her veins. It stings after such a build up, but she knows it will go away.

Kakashi simply lets out a quiet sigh of relief. She looks like she's about to faint, and she's provoking a fight? Not to mention she could have gone through with it even after they appeared. He had hoped his knowledge of her was enough to know she would give it up if she knew it was him. It looks like he's made some sort of bond as her handler.

"So," she starts. "You two are definitely not sexual fantasies come to life, which is disappointing."

Kakashi looks at her, and wonders how this woman can be the same that gave such an inspiring speech not two full days ago.

"Don't look at me like that Hatake. A girl can hope, don't judge me."

"Hound," he corrects, and she snorts and rolls her eyes. She's stopped shivering again, probably suppressing it, which is unhealthy.

"Oh, so I guess Wood Boy is now lion? Panther? Cougar?"

"Cat," aforementioned man states calmly.

"How many cats are there? I mean, I've seen at least fucking three already," she states, rubbing her eyes with the back of her hand. He catches sight of her fingertips, which are drained of color, and he reaches out to snatch her wrist.

She jerks back, and he feels her chakra hum underneath her skin, ready for action. She's jumpy as well. Something has happened, he knows it.

"Are you trying to kill yourself?" he asks lightly, inspecting the damage. It's not frostbite, but it is close. Her skin is like ice, and he can barely tell the difference between it and the frozen air around him.

"What? No. Fuck off and let me go you damn snoops. If I'm right you two have shit tons to share already," she protests.

His hands are too hot, and they burn like fucking flames. If they've been following her since Shimo, and she wasn't going mad at the meeting, then they know more than enough. True, the splinters will be heading out for reassignment after this cluster-fuck, but now they know an area to watch and probably names and faces as well. She needs to get word out for them to lay low. Shit, fuck, Tenzo... Yamato-fuck it, Wood Boy probably knows what's what. Which is another liability. More shit to add to the heap. Dammit. Dammit, dammit, *dammit* !

"Where have you been?" asks Hatake, and he looks at her like he has the damn right to ask her that. Like she owes him. Like he hasn't been fucking her over and selling her out. Seriously, *this guy* .

"Something came up. Why, you miss me?" she sneers. "Or did you miss the fucking files?"

If a horror movie bone white mask could look appalled, his would. Wood Boy shifts uncomfortably beside his captain, and Ryuishi feel like being mean, like lashing out.

"You left in unusual circumstances, and you've been silent for months. I-" he starts, but she jerks her hand away, or tries to at least. His grip is incredible, really.

"Will you stop?" she spits, "Like you give a flying fuck, Hatake. Oh, sorry, *Hound* ."

"Flying fuck?" murmurs Tenzo beneath his breath. He wonders if it is wise to be antagonizing a woman who apparently spends her free

time keeping an entire movement of people under her rule, when she isn't being a ruthless, violent missing-nin, or a manic house guest, or whatever else she does.

Kakashi ignores him and leans in closer, as if inspecting a tea set. She bares her teeth like a feral animal, more tired than anything. She wishes they would just go. She's not up for this crap, not yet.

"When's the last time you slept?" he asks, and she barks out a laugh. The Okiya, that's when. Every time she tries, she just... can't. It slips away. Her bed is too empty, her head too full.

She keeps drifting off to that same dream, of prayers in her voice, before it melts into some night terror.

"Cat," Hatake barks, and the cloaked and masked man stands straighter, "Shelter, and perimeter."

The man nods and with a hesitant look toward her, darts off after a moment.

"Good. You guys camp out here, and I'll be on my way," she bites out, meeting the soulless blank eyes of his mask.

"Watanabe, you're getting sloppy. Your feet are bleeding-"

Are they? she wonders. She can't really feel them. It's balls cold.

"-and your pulse is sluggish. Your core temperature must be dangerously low, because you feel like ice. You can't remember when you last slept-"

That's unfair, she just didn't tell him. It's only been like, maybe three or four days. She caught a nap somewhere in her travels.

"-You have lost weight, you're sporting injuries from a previous skirmish. I haven't seen you eat and we've been tailing you for a solid two days. You drank some water, and that was it."

"Hey now," she defends. "I have gum in my mouth. That's got to count for something."

"You're making less sense than usual," he replies, and she sneers at him again. Behind him, Wood Boy leaps back out of the trees. How long has it been since he left, like five seconds? What is time even?

"Listen, if you think that I'm cool with playing house with you fucks when you have done exactly jack shit for me, you're crazy," she tells him, trying to focus. He stares at her, and she realizes they are approaching similar heights. Finally, puberty did something right.

"What are you rambling about?"

"Hatake, Hound, whatever, I like you, I really do, but you are being purposefully obtuse," she grinds out. "I have given Konoha information that I could have sold for some really good cash. I could have bought out factions, ruined gangs, bribed enemies, and made small fortunes with that info. I spend time with you, and you're always digging, always looking for my weak spot. I have come to you guys again and again, and it's been fun, I like it, but you have returned *nothing*."

He blinks, not that she can see.

"I want to be your friend, I do, but man! You leaf shinobi are treacherous, you know that?" she states. Where is this coming from, she wonders. She knew they wouldn't give her anything, she hadn't expected anything. She's just... lashing out. She wants to rage about her boys, about Orochimaru, about Kisame and Zabuza, about everything weighing her down. Those are secrets though, so she's left... with this.

Kakashi blinks again.

"You don't pay me. You don't let me in legally. I don't get back up, or treaties, or support. Apparently, you don't stop digging in to my

business either," she snaps. "Even though I have done nothing to you, you are fucking hunting me."

"Watanabe, you never approached with any demands. Why are you upset now?"

"Because you act like I owe you. Act like I should bow to your authority. You act like you give a shit, like I shouldn't be royally pissed at you for endangering my people."

He sucks in a breath, and behind him Tenzo claps his hands. Like magic, a house begins to appear. Man, she would maybe sell her right tit for that ability. Well, okay maybe.

"Endangering?"

"You will have this mission on file. You will return, you will document their faces, skills, and any names you picked up. Trust me when I say those records are not safe, when I tell you that with the right amount of work anybody could steal them."

His silence is an answer, in its own way. They both know it's true. She herself might not be able to snatch the info from Konoha, but there are plants in their ranks and spies everywhere.

"What do you want, Watanabe?" he finally asks, and the questions throws her.

Her immediate response is sleep. She wants to sleep for days and not have to worry and plan. She wants to get roaring drunk and have fun. She wants her boys, and her little brothers, and to not have to constantly watch out for people using her.

She sneers at him, and if she keeps this up her face just might get stuck like this.

"Cat, assistance," Hatake orders Tenzo, and she goes to kick out at his shins. It connects, and he grunts. There is a slice of satisfaction

that runs through her, because she knows even if it wasn't crippling, it will bruise to all hell. Her hand reaches up to punch him in his stupid mask, but he catches that too.

"You're being very confrontational," he growls. "It's unnecessary."

"You are a surly little dog," she snarls back, wrestling with him, "who doesn't know when to back off." Her knee raises, but he blocks it with his shin, stepping inside her strike.

"You're destroying yourself, and I'm not going to allow that," he declares.

"I am not, and it's none of your damn business anyway."

They grapple, hands locked and arms straining against each other, and she hops to plant a foot in his gut. At this distance, it's not very strong, but it does push him back. She feels a shiver run down her spine, and her other foot kicks back at the Tenzo, connecting solidly with his chest. From all assumptions he was trying to put her in a choke-hold from behind, the bastard.

"Don't make me try, you assholes," she grits out, rearing her head back.

"Stop acting like a child, you need rest," he grunts.

"Pampered little shit-"

"Stubborn animal-"

"-ungrateful grey-haired prick-"

"-vain, reckless, out of control-"

"-haughty, holier-than-thou, hen-pecking-"

"-indecisive, secretive, obnoxious-"

She squawks, and pushes off his impressively solid abs, kicking her legs up and over his head. Her shoulders strain at the awkward angle as she throws herself over him, using the momentum to pull him off his feet. Her legs touch down, and she whips him around using the inertia, intent on throwing him across the clearing. It would have worked too, if he had let go of her hands like a sane person.

Instead, he holds tight, digits locked with hers. He soars over her head like planned, but the moment he becomes parallel, the weight of his body combined with her attempts to heave him away drag her off balance and she follows him as he skids across the snow on his back.

Only, she is dragged on her belly, which means that her already freezing body makes contact with the cold substance in every possible way. It slides down her shirt, under her bra, and down her fucking pants.

She can't suppress the shivering anymore. Her hands practically vibrate in his as he just lies there, waiting.

"L-L-Let m-me g-go," she chatters, spitting out slush, face down in the snow.

"No," he asserts.

"S-s-stop holding m-my h-hands, y-you f-f-fu-"

Somebody grabs her ankles, and she whines, low in her throat as they pin her legs, tucking them under their armpits.

"Eat tw-twelve th-thousand d-d-dicks, Wood Boy," she mewls.

"Please don't say such perverted things to my kōhai, Watanabe," Hatake remarks. "Later you can confess to him, but not now."

"Senpai!" Tenzo protests as his captain twists around to face her. His arms are crossed, and their hands are at weird angles. She thrashes

like a fish, twisting and jerking, hoping to throw his balance.

"Stop that," the gray haired man orders as he stands. She feels like a boar tied around a stick, ready to be spit roasted. She writhes, bucks, and squirms just to be obstinate.

"We all know that if you were at your best, this area would be leveled in a fight between us. Now you're just acting like a toddler who doesn't want to go to bed," he points out as they begin to walk her toward the little cabin.

"Eat s-s-shit and d-die," she snarls, and he looks at the man grabbing her legs as if to say 'my point exactly.' She hates that she can tell what that look is, even through the mask.

"I'm beginning to think this is just how you greet people," drawls Hatake. "By showing up wounded or otherwise unhealthy, attempting to run, and then initiating a fight you don't actually try to win."

She tugs their joined hands close and bites down on his forearm, only to chomp down on the Anbu armor beneath his cloak. Regret floods her. Her teeth hurt. Hatake, at least, has the grace to say nothing about it, and Tenzo follows his lead as they haul her into the tiny cabin, lethargically kicking and screaming the whole way.

AN: Fun times. A stressed Ryuishi is a grumpy Ryuishi. Having fanatics can be dangerous! Things begin to crumble a little, and stuff! Hints! Hints all over! Actually, hints started a while ago, but some people are complaining about plot. I feel you. I do. Sometimes I do lose it, other times though, it's just hard to see. See: Cold, Grass, Hidan. Among just a short few.

Also! Look at Kakashi being a worried friend but having no idea how to express it! Double also, Tenzo knows shit and is also a dork. I swear, every time I try to write one chapter with these guys, it turns in to two.

Info: I think I might have to split up my writings. OTRATS is going to reach a point where it covers what I'm going to say is 'the before time', and it's already super long. I want to stop, then immediately start with book two, which is just like, stuff. I have plans. I also have that other fic, which hasn't quite whispered it's secrets into my heart yet. Also, I have like, three chapters for SGU unedited.

Thank you to my readers, favoriters, and followers. Many happy-fun-times for my reviewers, who are the air in my lungs, and who always inspire me to keep writing. You guys honestly help me keep my muse. Also, you made me think about ships. It was enlightening.

Many blessings and thanks for my beta, Enbi, who gives me wings to soar, and also makes my nonsense readable.

Question: Suddenly, Kakashi, Tenzo, Kisame, Zabuza, Naruto, Gaara, Itachi, and whoever else you want, know the truth about Ryuishi. Her old life, her lost family, her death, the pains of mist, and her motivations. They know. How do they react? What do they do? OR What are the Akatsuki's/ Orochimaru's opinions on Ryuishi, or the Rakki Ryuu?

Meeting the Consequences of Cold

I don't own Naruto.

Inside the conjured wooden cabin in the Land of Hot Water, a few things become glaringly obvious in a very short amount of time.

The first is that the missing-nin is acting well outside of usual behavior patterns. When they finally bind her, legs and arms tied together at various points, she actively attempts to writhe free of her restraints. It is only a speedy intervention by Tenzō that stops her from dislocating her thumbs to slip out of her cuffs. The movement has hints of being practiced, like the muscle memory is there. At any other time it would have been smooth and coordinated, but her movements are clumsy and fatigued.

Minutes wear on, and there are periods where she begins to go limp and then immediately tenses again, her mind slipping in and out of consciousness. Her shivering begins to slow down, only occasionally overtaking her body. Even her insults come less, and then they are slurred through thick lips and a heavy tongue.

Kakashi is just relieved that sleep is finally claiming her. Tenzō, however, makes a different call.

He slips over to her prone body, and he takes her wrist in one hand. The skin is cold and dry, barely warmer than the ambient air, and her pulse is weak and sluggish beneath his fingertips. Her chest rises in a slow, shallow pattern.

He knows what this is.

Dark eyes turn toward his captain, who looks on in silence, and Tenzō feels like this is the last thing they need. This mission went out of control the moment this woman showed her face.

"Captain, the captive is showing symptoms of hypothermia," he intones seriously.

His captain may be a very capable shinobi, but they both know that Tenzō has more knowledge in these matters. Admittedly, it is still very sparse, but it is more than the emergency first aid his captain excels in.

There is a groan, and she squirms again, slipping back into the waking world for a few moments. Long enough to snarl and mumble something unintelligible before her eyelids start to droop.

"Sometimes, I think she survived this long by luck and sheer stupidity," his captain sighs, moving closer.

Tenzō is almost inclined to agree. Almost, because though he has never seen her truly fight, he has seen her operate. The Kiri no Ningyo is cunning and intelligent, he thinks. So much so, that he never even imagined the type of power she has.

This woman, this kunoichi he had written away as a spy to be handled by his senpai, or another agent of subterfuge, she was the *Rakki Ryuu* and nobody had a clue. He is sure he was never meant to figure it out either, but he had witnessed it first hand.

She is a lowborn myth come to life, and apparently the head of a political movement. He can't even begin to imagine how it began, because she's nothing like what he would expect a leader to be. She's crass and rude and violent. What kind of leader spends time cooking walnut rolls, or giving manicures out to their handler?

His head hurts, and he tries not to think about it. It's too confusing, and he needs to focus.

His captain removes his gloves and reaches his bare hands out to confirm the diagnosis. He knew she was cold before-how could she not be? Crop tops aren't exactly winter wear-but now she feels almost corpse-like, stiff and freezing.

Suddenly, the situation becomes much more serious.

"This is bad, " Kakashi breathes.

"Captain?"

"Sleep deprivation, exhaustion, exposure, injuries from previous skirmishes," he lists off, "Stress, lack of food, and mild dehydration. We watched her for two days doing all of this. She's been gone for months. This behavior could have been ongoing."

Tenzō suddenly understands that not only is she clever, she's self destructive, and worse of all, resilient. She's been destroying herself in the slowest possible way.

"Sempai, she needs medical attention," Tenzō starts, "Immediate care as well. There is snow and her clothes, and if we observe previous behavior as well, a large amount metal chain wrapped around her legs."

The masked man grits his jaw and stands up. Idiot, he thinks, she's an absolute idiot. Somewhere in that thick skull of hers she must know what she's doing. Isolating herself, drawing away from him, pushing herself. Where had she been? What happened? What set her off on this spree?

He wants answers, wants to drag them out of her, but she's barely conscious. She's freezing to death right in front of him. How could someone from Kiri, arguably the coldest of the Elemental nations, be stupid enough to get hypothermia?

If he thinks it out, he might recognize that he is too close to the asset, but he is frustrated and angry. She has so much potential as a leader and a kunoichi. She's a legend in more ways than one. She's powerful, capable, and she's a damn idiot.

Why didn't she come to him when she needed help?

He runs his hand through his hair, knocking his hood off, and reviews what he knows of treatment. He's no medic-nin, but he knows that if they warm her up too fast it could send her into shock or cardiac arrest. He's half surprised the fighting didn't already do that.

His kōhai must sense his frustration, and his lack of knowledge, because he begins moving in a crisp, professional manner, pulling a kunai out to cut at her pants. He knows underneath the feline mask the man will be blank-faced, swallowing his embarrassment and storing it away to release at a later time.

"Blankets?" Kakashi asks. The brown-haired man nods, working the sharp blade through the thick fabric. He can see the silver of her meteor hammer wrapped around her legs, the metal frosted in some areas, and everything is dusted with snow from her slide outside.

"Dry clothes, blankets, and body heat. I'll check the appendages for frostbite," he answers gravely. But they don't have blankets. They aren't in the standard ANBU gear. All they have are their cloaks and clothes.

His eyes slide to the pack by the wall, worn with use and locked to her chakra. She carries blankets. She uses them as bedding when she comes to his apartment. With stiff movements he crosses the wooden abode and snatches it up, squatting across from her and wrapping her hand around the sealed latch.

"Watanabe," he urges, "Watanabe, I need to get into your bag."

Closed eyes blink open and slide over to look at him. He sees confusion, and bone-deep weariness inside their coal depths.

"What?" she slurs, brows furrowing.

"Blankets, we need blankets. You need to open your bag, just put your chakra into your hand."

"I don't want to sleep," she mumbles, her gaze sliding away.

"Put your chakra into your hands," he tries again.

"You feel like fire," she says nonsensically.

"Just let your chakra flow into your hands. Blankets, Watanabe."

"Side pocket," comes her husky voice.

He moves her hand over to the side pocket, and there is a trickle under his palms. Freezing, corpse-like skin floods with chakra, thick and unnatural against his skin. A soft pop, and a scroll reveals itself, buried underneath mounds of candy. He lets her hands go and digs it out.

They slide lethargically back toward her body, and she looks down where Tenzō is gently untangling her weapon from her tied together legs before closing her eyes again.

He unwraps the scroll, and is almost surprised to find no chakra lock. He guess it would make no sense to seal your bedding so securely.

A grunt escapes his kōhai as he unseals the scroll. There is a cloud of smoke, and then several blankets and pillows. He wonders briefly where she keeps her camping gear.

The rattling of chains fills the cabin as the weapon is dropped off to the side, and then the sound of a sharp intake of breath.

Tenzō has never really looked at Watanabe's skin before, even with those ridiculous shorts she favors. It never seemed pertinent, but now, checking for damage, he wonders if he should have. The beginning stages of frostbite and the shock of hypothermia has drained the color away, causing the tangled map of scars to stand out even more than usual.

He pushes the thoughts away and moves up, working at her shirt, examining the stark maroon bruise on her gut. There is a snap of

blankets being shaken out in the dim gloom of their shelter. Her shirt joins her pants and weapon in a pile.

Her body jerks awake again, tension filling her form as she fights her way back to consciousness. He narrowly avoids cutting her as she thrashes, eyes flaring open, teeth bared in a snarl. Chakra leaks out and fills the room like oil spilling from a bottle. She lunges forward at the closest target, and his captain scrambles to assist. Even with her arms and legs tied she snaps her teeth an inch away from his form, desperate to do damage.

"Watanabe!" his captain calls, " You need medical-"

She howls as he wraps his arms around her waist, hauling her back. It sounds terrible and unhinged. The silver-haired operative grunts as she drives her head back against his porcelain mask, smashing it into his nose.

"Tenzō," he forces out, "Continue."

His partner leaps up as she wears herself out once more, sluggishly wriggling and growling as the Mokuton user inspects her fingers and toes for damage. There is minor frostbite, blisters that he knows will feel like hell later, but nothing too large just yet. His biggest worry is about her core temperature accompanied by the growing list of small injuries and exhaustion.

She jerks a few more times, her features going slack as she attempts to breathe, which seems like it's taking a lot more effort than usual. The world around her spins and she stops for a moment, leaning back against the furnace keeping her steady. What was she doing? She'll figure it out. Just... give her a fucking second.

"We need to get her warm," a familiar voice says from somewhere in front of her.

She disagrees. It's not cold. It's not anything. It's just sort of numb.

"She's damp from the snow, we need to dry her off," says a voice beside her ear. She knows that one too. She's supposed to be angry at it, but damn if she doesn't want to sleep. Or faint. Or both.

Her blurry vision hedges with black static, and she knows this feeling. Oh man, she's blacking out. Her heart is thumping weirdly in her chest, and she can't feel anything. She wants to panic, but exhaustion is smothering it out. Something brushes against her skin. She can't really feel it, it's more of a light pressure than anything else. The furnace burns behind her, and it beckons her, comforting and warm. Like Zabuza.

Her head lolls back against the form she is leaning on, resting her head on his shoulder, exposing the long lines of her throat. The black is spreading, and she can't really hear, which is a bad sign. Man, she is really fucking dizzy.

"Set up the bedding," Hatake's voice calls. "I'll take first watch. After we stabilize her we need to move."

"Understood." A pause. "Sempai, you realize body heat...?"

"Tenzō, I'm not stupid."

"What if she... misunderstands?"

"I am almost completely sure none of this is regulation, Tenzō. We stopped using call names, and we made shelter. If you have any other ideas on how to keep a dangerous rogue ninja who also happens to be the leader of a political movement and potential ally alive, let me know," Kakashi answers.

There really is no code for this anymore. He's stuck between handler and ambassador. All he knows is that save for the Hokage, he has all the direct authority to make choices concerning the woman.

Tenzō eyes his captain as he places the pillows and blankets. He does not envy the man one bit. The asset is out again, slumped

against his captain, and still she is causing trouble. He doesn't know what this is, what *she* is anymore. He knows it's going to be almost impossible to sleep with the new discovery and subsequent revelations. It's also very hard to not notice that the missing nin is very near naked. Even with her scars and muscle tone, he notices the slender lines of her neck and the hollow dips in her throat. The way her bust seems to press up and out with every breath, and the length of her toned legs...

Tenzō carefully blanks his mind. He's *not* going to think about it. Nope.

His captain shifts her body onto the nest of blankets and pillows before pulling off his cloak and outer wear. He strips his wakizashi and his chest plate but stops there, settling himself down and moving to cradle her against his chest. His arm moves up to pull the bone pin from her hair, and it cascades around them, slightly damp and tangled. It's almost intimate, the way he puppets her around and covers them both with the blanket.

Tenzō watches from a few feet away as he looks down through his mask and moves a stray bunch of hair from her pale face, and he wonders how this mess started. For as long as she has been around she has been copper skin, aggression, joviality, crudeness, and sarcasm. What brought her to the point she was limp and feral, alone in the snow?

What happened?

Ryuishi sleeps in fits.

The first time she wakes up she is driven by some desperate need to get away, and she is shivering her tits off. Something holds her, and she can feel cord around her ankles and wrists. It's colder than all hell, and for some reason her clothes are mostly gone.

She doesn't feel like anything happened, but she wants to leave. She feels vulnerable and angry, and she wants to beat a motherfucker with another motherfucker.

She manages to gargle out, "Son of a rat fucker with limp dicks for fingers-" before someone is shushing her from behind. She realizes they are warm as fuck, and actually a fairly comfortable pillow before she quiets down again.

The second time she opens her eyes, it's on the verge of a nightmare. She strangles a groan in her throat and blinks her eyes open, groggy and disoriented, choking on a sob. The presence behind her is gone, but somebody has taken their place. They smell like tree sap and fresh green leaves, and she seeks them out, tucking her arms against them and burying her face in their chest. There is mild sputtering as she attempts to mold herself against them, and a faint chuckling from the distance. She doesn't care, all she knows is that somebody is stroking her hair and it feels nice and she's so fucking tired.

The third time she wakes up, it's for a couple hours, and it is agony. Her body feels like it's pushing fucking pins and needles through her muscles, and her joints feel like somebody replaced them with rusted pieces of metal. She can't help the moan that breaks out, and the shivering is making it *so much worse*. Her lungs feel like shit, and her heart is doing some fucked up stuff in her chest. It's all fluttery and off rhythm. Her throat is dry and her mouth and jaw hurt and good lord, what the hell?

She coughs, and woah, would you look at that, somebody is spooning her. She feels an arm move across her chest, tightening their hold, and she coughs again. Water, oh fuck, she wants water.

Her bags is in front of her and she goes to squirm toward it, but that arm holds her back.

"Sempai," a voice calls. "She's awake, and coughing."

"I can hear that," comes Hatake's droll reply.

So, Wood Boy is spooning her and her clothes are gone. The thought makes her want to crack a dirty joke, but she's cold as hell, her teeth won't stop chattering, everything hurts, she's thirsty, and maybe sick.

"Water," she rasps.

Footsteps, and somebody is shifting her. She probably makes a dumb sound, because it hurts to move, but then her head is tilted up and she's gulping down sweet, life-giving liquid.

"Here I thought idiots couldn't get sick," Hatake's voice hums from above. "But I suppose that almost dying from exhaustion and exposure can make anyone ill."

She swallows down one last gulp and creaks her eyes open. A canine mask floods her vision and she scowls.

"Fuck you," she bites out, before hacking up her lungs.

"You're coming back to Konoha," he announces, and she tenses. "You are going to rest and see a doctor-"

"I just rested!" she protests in a croaky voice. She has shit to do, places to go, people to see.

"For eight hours in how many days?"

She concedes his point. Her silence is telling, as are her chattering teeth.

"No doctors," she tries again. She knows that if they go to the doctors they will take samples, and her chakra network will be worked with.

"Maybe," he says. She grits her teeth and blinks up at him, clearing the sleep from her expression.

"If you do this to me," she rasps, "If you bring in anymore people on my secrets, expose me or compromise me any more, I will end our correspondence."

She watches him think it over. There is a sudden stillness to the room.

"No doctors," he says finally. "But you're coming back to Konoha. We all have to deal with the fallout if you work yourself to death."

"Fuck off," she spits out, coughing.

"Consider it Konoha paying you for once," he answers, thinking of her previous words. It might be a bit bitter, but she doesn't care.

He chews over ideas in his head. They need to earn her trust, and so far she has been doing the heavy lifting. She's right about that.

"I can talk to the Hokage about the report on the events in Shimo," he tries. Her head snaps up, and she eyes him warily.

"I can't lie to him, but I can write the archived report vaguely. Blue hair might be green, light skin dark, and appearances can change. Information that could be taken from the hard copy, like you're worried about," he offers.

"Your oral report to the old man will still remain the truth, won't it?"

He nods once. She understands. She has always understood that he is selling her out little by little. The fact that the report that will go down though could be skewed enough to give her people breathing room, well...

"Fine," she bites out.

The two men breathe a sigh of relief for a moment, knowing the struggle won't be so hard with her now. They still retain information, and they get to report a successful mission as well as contact with a missing asset.

Ryuishi wriggles her butt against her seat, and seems to realize exactly where she is. That is not a seat, that is a crotch. That is Tenzō's crotch. Don't get her wrong, she doesn't mind being barely dressed most of the time, but there are certain connotations in this position.

Don't think about his penis . Shit, she's thinking about his penis.

"Can I get off Wood Boy's lap and put clothes on now?" she asks.

The journey back to Konoha is tiring, mostly because Ryuishi's foul mood lingers like her stupid chattering teeth and persistent cough. Winter isn't exactly her favorite time of the year, and everything is fucking cold as hell, even if they leave most of the thick snow behind in The Land of Hot Water.

She manages to get a quick bath in before they leave, and even though she feels marginally better, she still feels like crap. Anger mounts as she berates herself for being so fucking stupid and leaving her cloak at the brothel, because now she's sick. Stress doesn't help out, and neither does Hatake's nagging or Tenzō's odd glances.

She's a damn adult, for fucks sake. An adult almost twice over now, and she's been looking after herself just fine for as long as she remembers. Keiko didn't, and Kagami had no interest in it back then either.

(She carefully doesn't recall Kisame rubbing her back or Zabuza patching her wounds.)

Her whole body hurts, albeit it's less 'some of your flesh literally formed into ice and your organs started failing' and more 'you have the flu after all of that happened, or because of it, who knows'.

The worst part is she just wants this done and over. She'll get there, sleep for three days, and then fucking leave. Hatake and Tenzō,

however, keep spouting bullshit like 'Pushing your body past it's limits' and 'food and hydration are important while ill and traveling'.

It would make sense any other time, but she isn't going for it right now. Especially since they basically have her on a leash. They can't bind her hands, and she might actually slaughter them if they carry her, so she gets to run with a cord connecting her to Hatake. She's touched that they pretend to care, really, but she's going to go with the Mist line of thought on this one: keep going or die.

So she does, because if she stops twisting and diving and running, she's going to start thinking about things. That's the last thing she wants to do, because now she's acting, she's working, she's doing things again. She is living life and it's going *just fine* .

She coughs into her hand and tries not to feel too tired. A shiver wracks her body and she wishes she was somewhere warm, like under the blankets with arms wrapped around her, sitting on-

She promptly picks up pace. Nope. Not happening. *Haha, arousing thoughts, you can't catch me*, she thinks to herself.

Then, because there is a higher power with a very small amount of mercy, they arrive at Konoha, where she is left with outside the walls with Tenzō. It's cold as fuck, and she keeps shivering like a crack addict without a fix. She doesn't allow herself to cough, even though the urge wells up and it rattles around in her chest. Coughing is very loud and she's afraid it will draw attention to them, and also that he might, like, try to help or something.

There is silence, and Tenzo steadily watching her from behind a porcelain mask. She shifts uncomfortably. "Hey," she whispers quietly, and there is the soft rustling of cloth. "I'm still pissed, but I'm sorry I told you to eat twelve thousand dicks," she murmurs, just loud enough for him to hear. It's a little much to say to a guy who's just doing his job.

"A-ah," comes his reply.

Another silence, and she shivers. Man, this is miserable. Guilt gnaws at her, because Tenzō is just around her age, he's had so much crap piled onto him, he has a pretty face, and she feels bad.

"Thank you for not letting me die," she breathes.

"That was... I mean Senpai..."

"I smelled tree sap, after my nightmare," she admits, "Hatake doesn't smell like that, and he doesn't... you're a good cuddler." He clears his throat, quietly of course, but she's nervous and she babbles. It's what she does. "I'm sorry if it made you uncomfortable," she finishes. The wind sweeps through and she shivers violently. She doesn't expect the stiff, awkward arm that comes around her and pulls her beneath his cloak. The temperature difference is instantly noticeable, and she leans into the warmth. He doesn't say a word, and she follows his lead on it, hiding beneath the black fabric.

Ryuishi tries to get a peek of the stars above them. The cold air sucks, and her muscles ache with use and wear, but she will admit that for some reason, stars shine brighter in the cold. Silver pinpricks of light, filling up the empty darkness.

She thinks that falling through the Void would have been easier if there were stars to look at.

Hatake ambles by about an hour later, pausing as he spies her crouched form underneath his teammate's cloak. For a moment his lazy, half lidded eye just stares at the scene before he turns to her.

"Watanabe, I see you have finally succeeded in getting under my kōhai's clothes," he comments lightly.

She resists the urge to comment on how lame that was-Hatake is trying, she'll give him that-and she sneers, her face barely poking out of the fabric. "For my next trick, I'll be getting into your bed," she fires back.

He just stares, even though she can feel Tenzō fidget uncomfortably. "Mah, it won't be the first time," he says lazily. She can almost hear Wood Boy choke on his own spit.

"What can I say, Hatake? You have very cute sheets, I'm sure everyone would love to hear about the shuriken patterns."

He sighs, and she almost picture him holding out the signature orange book. He gets more and more like his future self every time she visits.

"Patrol pattern breaks in five, which is our window to get in unseen. I'm sorry to have to tell you, but that means you have to leave his cloak."

Ryuishi retreats inside the heavy fabric, pressing her back against Wood Boy's shins.

"Not for five minutes I don't," she calls out, savoring the last vestiges of warmth.

She would ask questions when they travel straight over the walls, which seems sort of obvious, but she figures that as long as she isn't going straight through the gate she's fine.

Then it's Hatake apartment, and she ignores them after she steps through the door. Shower, then bed. That's it, she'll stay for three days, then she'll go on.

As usual, her plan fails because of unforeseen variables.

Uchiha Itachi has been waiting for the Kiri no Ningyo to come back for two months now. He has watched for her around the village, listened for rumors on missions, and dug deep into what he can find out, because *she knew, she knew before it happened, how did she know ?*

It eats at him, the things she said that night, and how they all came tumbling back the moment the his elder had given him such a grim prognosis. His face stayed blank, and his pulse steady, but he had burned with bewilderment and suspicion.

He watches his clan, once honorable and respectable, grow more and more ready for violence. He saw chances for peace dwindle before his eyes, offers and outreached hands ignored, and he lamented. He knew what would come.

He has little faith in Shisui's plans of converting the elders with the Sharingan, and he is growing desperate. All he can see was extermination, one side over another, done quick and efficient to halt a full blown war.

He needed answers from the woman, because *she knew*, but she was missing as well. Not one to waste time, he started discreetly looking into her.

What he found was facades.

Watanabe Ryuishi, the Kiri no Ningyo. One third of the fabled Kiri no Kaijuu, and sole survivor of the last bloody graduation exam of the Mist. Wanted A-ranked missing-nin, veteran of the Third Shinobi War. She was documented as a particularly cruel opponent who specialized in underwater combat and taijutsu. She used a meteor hammer, and had a penchant for genjutsu, which was strange because all reports from after the war indicated otherwise. She was part of an assault unit from ages seven to eleven, before she defected. The blackout in Kiri made it hard to gather information on why, or how, but it was known she disappeared for several years, before emerging with a new found skill in lesser ninjutsu, and scars that indicated at capture and confinement. Tracker reports said she was resilient, and clever. Itachi lived through it firsthand and could testify the same.

That was her best known persona.

Around the village she didn't have a name, really. Some thought it might be Yuri, but no one really knew. Gossip abounded about her, as she was often seen with Hatake Kakashi. She was a funny, bright young woman who enjoyed long summer dresses and cooking. One particular Akimichi needed little prompting to tell a hanged Itachi about what a lively young woman she was, and how her unexpected recipes were delightful and ground breaking. Rumor had it the Hatake and her were courting, which baffled him. This was a ninja village, and it was fairly obvious that he was her handler. Then again, he was a prodigy, and he supposed it would appear that way to others.

This was another facet of her.

Then there was what he knew personally. A strange mix of that steely, matron-like facade she wore around the village, and the world-worn, wizened woman by the fire that night. She worried over the nourishment and comfort of the ANBU team, and made snappish, witty banter with his captain. She lured him into a trap, then when it came to the point where she could have killed him, she led him back to her campsite, cooked him stew, and offered her outstretched hand.

That was number three.

Now, as he watches her from a distance through the window of his captain's apartment, there is something different. The others are gone, leaving her alone for a few moments. She coughs into the crook of her arm, and flips around yet again on the sofa.

Strange expressions keep filtering over her features: anger, guilt, and some deep, unnameable sadness. He has been here for hours now. She had been inside the village for two days before he found out through Tenzō-senpai, who had returned with a confused expression he only wore when in contact with the woman herself.

He had watched her isolate herself, and her comments with Hatake had been more sharp than witty, barbed words meant to sink in

slowly over time. Several times he had watched her shivering form tense, her lips pulling back into a snarl, and her hands balling into fists like she would enjoy nothing more than to tear everything apart. Then something would draw her down from that step. A hum from his captain, her own deep breaths, a comforting touch.

If he had more information, he bets he could identify even more of these pieces of her, point them out by behavior and patterns. She's made of so many of them, after all.

Itachi has always been good at reading people, for seeing the truth of what they are. It's a fact, and she is no different.

He understands the simple fact that there is no one true face of Watanabe Ryuishi. Each of these fronts, they are all part of her in some way, but they are groomed and shaped to look like something completely different. And yet, one thing runs consistent through them all: she has an ingrained need to help people in the way she thinks is best. She genuinely cares about them, in a way ninja should not. She thrives on positive attention and encouragement, and she believes in some strange sense of equality. It's an innate desire that expresses itself in confusing and often seemingly contrary ways.

He would have never found out if he hadn't looked for the little details-the manner in which she spoke with the stall owners and storekeepers, the way she left meals for his captain and the team, her history of keeping her battles away from settlements, the rumors of the closeness of the Kiri no Kaijuu, the way she offered him assistance.

He breathes deep from his perch, and he watches her shift again, attempting to smother herself in her cocoon of blankets.

He hears the crackle of low burning flame in his memory, recalls the light reflecting off her empty eyes the night he followed her.

All I know is that I want to help, she told him.

When the time comes, she had said, and all of this vague nonsense finally means something, let me know what your choice is.

The time has come, and he cannot decide, not with more information. She will not begrudge him that, not if he goes about it right.

Itachi waits, and he observes. The time is coming where he will confront her and comes to his decision. He hopes that what he has seen stays true, and that she can be someone she wants to be.

Itachi could use a helping hand.

AN: SO! Let me state a few things outright: Hypothermia is a serious medical condition and their treatment of it was what people are actually supposed to do in a survival situation. It was not fanservice. Hypothermia also subdues the immune system and leaves it open to infection, along with causing damage to organs and tissues. Remember when I said that her not being able to recognize the damage she takes is a bad thing? This is an example of it. Leading from this, Tenzo doesn't like Ryuishi so much as he now recognizes her value as an asset to Konoha. Random thoughts aside, both he and Kakashi are tasked with caring for a diplomatic nightmare in this situation. No matter how it turns out, it could be bad for them. From there, we see Kakashi might like her as a person, maybe, kind of, not really. Also, Itachi does not think wanting to help people is a good thing. It's not a bad thing either, but to him, it is a useful is so much I want to say about this chapter, but I will see if people pick up on what I'm dropping here. Also, I have new fanart and it is DOPE AS FUCK. CHECK IT ON MY PROFILE.

Thank you to all my readers, favoriters, and followers. Everyone who reviews, please take my sincerest thanks because ya'll COOL AS FUCK, and you keep me writing, because I LOVE READING YOUR REVIEWS.

May the heavens shine down upon my glorious beta, Enbi, who has started being busy again, my prayers are with them.

Question: What do you think the reunion between either Kisame and Ryuishi or Zabuza and Ryuishi would be like? OR What do Naruto and Gaara get up to, now that they have been influenced by their big sister?

Meeting a Proposal

I do not own Naruto. Trigger warning for mentions of rape and sexual assault.

Ryuishi waits until her cough has subsided and her muscles have stopped screaming to sneak away. It takes three days exactly, and if Hatake thought he was clever by making everything really comfortable and presenting her with gestures of physical affection, then by God he was totally right.

She doesn't want to leave, she really doesn't. Waking up to his insane early morning bullshit is comfortable in ways she forgot she could be. His droning voice, and his hands patting the top of her head awkwardly make her feel content, make her feel wanted and welcome.

Ryuishi realizes exactly how fucked up it is when feeling safe and warm is a warning signal. He's getting too close, and she just... she just can't. If she lets him in anymore, he will destroy her. It's his job to do so. He's only there because he has a mission to convert her. He's not her friend, not really. It's a game they play, being so close and amicable. He doesn't actually like her, he's just getting better at the game than her.

She waits until day three, and she hardens her heart. She bolsters her resolve and wraps her insecurities around herself like armor, feeding them to her experience and pessimism. She savors one last quiet meal with him. She memorizes the way his hair looks, and his dumb, expressive eye, his hums and hahs. They spend a night reading Icha Icha on opposite sides of the couch, and she commits the scent of cheap soap and ozone to her fond recollections.

Before she leaves, she drops three files on the counter. It helps remind her that this is business, not friendship, no matter what she

wants. Then she absconds into the cold night, wrapped in his cloak.

Alright, so she might actually consider them amicable business partners to the point where she can steal his stuff. She can allow that. Besides, Wood Boy wasn't there to steal from, so she has to stick with Hatake's. He should be happy she also didn't snag his mask when she was at it. How cool would she look then? Pretty fucking cool, if you ask her.

She makes it past the walls ease, using an evacuation tunnel beneath the Hokage monument and dodging patrols. Or, mostly dodging, because she has a tail. Dear Lord, why is everybody tailing her ass these days?

She decides that if they have business with her, then they can wait until they're both out of Konoha patrol ranges. Then they can do whatever the fuck it is they want. She's got business in Tanzaku Quarters and that town is basically a shit-storm on a stick. If Yugakure is the nice, spa oriented vegas, Tanzaku is the dirty, gambling, whoring, drinking, drug infested side of it.

Meaning, it's one of her strongest footholds in Fire Country. The Mumei were on that place like white on rice as soon as they could be.

Ryuishi has to make sure some of the gangs running around aren't going too nuts about the whole Rakki Ryuu thing, check up on the local clan enforcers, and oversee the taxes they are implementing on the working girls. Not to mention there is a booming pornography trade there, the brainchild of an artist who happens to also be a voyeur.

She takes a breath of cold air and revels in her brand new, warm as hell cloak. She'll have to steal more stuff from Hatake, his shirt was also high quality. He buys good quality clothing, probably believing they'll last longer. They would too, if she didn't appropriate them.

With a stretch that makes her spine pop like a bag of popcorn, she sets off, humming Fatboy Slim to herself, deciding how best to be an asshole to her uninvited guest. She finally settles on something that won't tire her, but will stretch her out and act as a warm up.

It's a tragedy she never gets to see the face of Uchiha Itachi when he finally observes her plan in action. The wry, dry smirk of amusement that crosses his face when he sees a crowd of her and several Mizu Bunshin surfing down a river's surface on chakra coated feet is something worth seeing. Especially because he seems so amused that the clones are teasing each other silently with nudges and shoves as they skate over rapids.

The way several of them dart into the woods and seem to break off of the group at random intervals is also clever, not to mention the traps he occasionally has to avoid, laid by clones. If he didn't have a doujutsu he might have even lost her, but even though everyone of her clones are filled with that noxious, nauseating chakra, only she has infected Gates. He can only look at it for a few seconds through Sharingan before his whole body shudders and prepares to empty itself, but they are enough to stay close. He didn't use his accumulated leave to chase after her so he could lose to a nightmare-inducing phenomenon.

He's surprised she noticed him so soon. She has a keen sense of being chased, it's an admirable trait.

He watches another cloaked clone elbow her none too gently in the breast, and watches as she shoves it into a rock, the water carrying her swiftly pass. Using the current to accelerate is also respectable. It can be tricky to control one's chakra and keep a stable surface to ride the white water as skillfully as she does, but it may be simpler for someone who is used to navigating the waves and tides of an ocean.

Soon enough, she switches course and takes to the trees once more. He admires how fluid she is as she moves around obstacles, using what he would call acrobatics to swing and slide her way

around. If he didn't keep a close watch, he would lose her here as well, as the clones begin to diverge in honest in separate directions, and none leave a chakra or scent trail. He almost finds it hard to tail her as it is. Even recovering from an illness and setting a slow pace, it is hardy and restless. She doesn't stop to take breaks, or rest, and he has even spotted her eating and drinking as she moves, her hands skillfully dipping into packets of dried goods and unscrewing canteens as she moves.

The only time she has paused was to relieve herself, and he almost lost her because he refused to watch that, and she moved in yet another direction directly afterwards.

Eventually, she does come to rest though, and he is wary of another trap as she sets up her spartan camp on the outskirts of Tanzaku, a few kilometers away. He has an unsettled feeling as he approaches from the shadows, two days gone past.

He oozes out of the treeline, and she looks up from her campfire. A flash of recognition crosses her features, but it is followed quickly by a look of exasperation, then understanding.

"Well, this was a bit sooner than I expected," she admits, stirring the pot. He does not fail to notice that her weapon is half peeking out from her pants, or the way her body shifts from offensive to defensive. What surprises him is the soft splashes he hears in the underbrush, indicative of Water Clones bursting. He thought they were already dispersed.

He eyes her expressionlessly as she doubles the serving size, automatically pulling out more ingredients. The situation is too calm, too collected, almost as if she had planned it this way. It must be.

"You knew I would come," he states, and it really isn't a question.

She shrugs, nonchalant and unfazed. "I didn't count on it, actually. I lay a lot of plans and it's up to people to go through them. I just wait for it to happen or not, then roll with the situations as they come." An

expression crosses her face, bitter and sarcastic as if she had an entertaining thought. "Then again, sometimes things still surprise me, but that's life I guess."

He comes closer, waiting in the odd quiet of the night, and she gestures for him to sit. He complies. "How did you know?" he asks, the question burning bright as a flame inside his mind.

The missing-nin hums a soft note to herself, and she hands him a skewer of roasted rabbit. It smells savory and delicious, seasoned with herbs and glazed over. "I already told you, I know tons of stuff, Itachi."

He sends her a scathing look. That is not enough, not near enough. He won't trust her, ever, but he can't even begin to try if she won't make the effort. Especially if she refers to him in such a familiar way.

A sigh escapes her lips, and she tears off a piece of meat with her teeth. The action reminds him of a predator tearing apart its prey.

"You already passed the test. Not once was I badgered or cast even more suspicious looks in Konoha. They didn't try to kill or detain me either, which is what I would have guessed. You didn't tell anyone we talked," she tells him.

He does not answer. He did inform his superior that he made contact, but was declined. The elder did not comment on it, and accepted it like he expected such a thing to take place. Other than that, he remained silent. The way she spoke of it, as if she was sure he was going to need help, as if she could help him. It was subtly urgent, and it stirred his instinct. He thought it over again and again, but he could see no harm to Konoha or his clan if he did not speak of it.

The offer was made to him, and only him. It belonged to him, in ways that even he himself did not.

"Now, you see what I was talking about, but you don't trust me. I made hints at things, and you figured about a third of it out. That's impressive as it is, but you need more than me talking. You need proof that I can do what I say, and that I'm not going to go against your factions, that I won't use this later on," she says.

He does not let it show, but her insight is correct. She has a firm understanding of his predicament. He takes a bite of his own rabbit. It is as good as it smells. He isn't surprised, she is a talented cook.

"So I have options. I could say that you need me more than I need you. What goes down has nothing to do with me, and I tried," she explains, and it chafes him to know this is true. "I could also lie and show you proof in other ways. I could threaten you and show you I could harm you more than anything you know," she ponders out loud.

He tenses here, and he looks at her, wondering if she knows as much as she thinks she does. The smirk she gives him is not kind in the least.

"You have a big heart, Itachi-san. One that is loyal to the core. You care about your village, and the people inside of it. I could threaten Konoha, but it would have a small effect. More than that, I could threaten the one family member you love more than anything," she states blithely.

He bristles, and he goes to stand up, to strike her down, but she raises her hand imploringly. He halts, cold anger burning under his skin. His face is impassive and expressionless, but she looks at him with open eyes. They aren't pitying, and they aren't victorious. She looks understanding, and there is a deep, unhealable wound he sees in that moment.

"I wouldn't," she confides with heartbreaking honesty. "I have had that torn away from me. My whole family, the people I love most, they aren't here."

He slowly sits back down.

"I don't want to use those methods, Itachi-san," she admits, her eyes darting to stare into the darkness around him. This is that strange mix of personalities, that in-between stage where she can't figure out what to say or feel.

"You would though, if you felt you must," he accuses in a flat tone. Her silence is revealing, and he feels like she is more of a threat than he gave her credit for.

"Tomorrow, I can show you proof, *if* you follow my lead. Know this though, if you betray my confidence, if you move against me," she breathes in, pausing to collect her thoughts. A sudden mask of coldness and distant cruelty takes over her face. Another persona, another piece of her shining through.

"I know what I am capable of, Itachi-san. Even if I'm weak against children, even if I hate myself forever afterward, I could do it. Even my death would not stop it," she tells him.

Plans, he thinks again, laid behind and waiting for the right trigger, the wrong step. She has plots laid out, traps all around. He came to find answers, but he is unsure if he was ready for the depth of them. He nods, once and only once, and she looks unsure of herself. She stares at him, her eyes roaming over his features and searching for something. He continues to eat in his silence, and she follows suit, looking him over. The threat hangs above them like a tangible thing, a spirit sucking away at the mood.

They move to bed down, and get rest for the big day ahead.

"You're a good kid, Itachi," she murmurs from her hammock, surrounded by darkness. "For what it's worth, I'm sorry life is turning out this way for you."

He thinks it over as they fall into a light, restful sleep. There it is again, that empathy, that understanding. She wants to be helpful, to

be kind, but something smothers it out of her, chokes it away and stops her as best it can.

Itachi wonders if anyone ever said those words to her.

Someone should have.

The first thing she does in the morning is wake up from her mission sleep and tumble out of her hammock. She roams toward the river with a dead look on her face, and he feels like he should perhaps warn her that though the climate is slightly less cold to the west, it is still very cold.

She comes back, her hair wet and her face drawn, like she knew ahead of time but had the horrible desire to bathe anyway. After that, she struggles to make what may be the strongest cup of tea Itachi has ever seen.

She blinks and sighs, looking at him. "We have to make you look less..." She squints, analyzing his features, "Rich, upper-class shinobi child."

He does not dignify her with an answer.

"Seriously, I can blend if I change clothes, but you look exactly like what you are. Where we are going, you need to look like an akasenko," she grumbles, dragging her bag to her and scrounging through it. She has some stuff that might fit him, and if it doesn't, even better. She can use some of her palest foundation to cover up some of his more distinctive features, and if she takes away some of his outer layers he already looks ragged.

He might be pretty in the future, but right now he looks like a well muscled, zero-body fat killing machine with pretty eyes. She can smudge it up and make him look more of a starving kid who does manual labor, but it will take work.

She digs through and finds clothes she didn't know she had. She really needs to go through her scrolls, there's so much junk in there. Like a purse that hasn't been cleaned in a while. When did she even get a farmer's outfit?

She shrugs. The drawstring shorts will work, and so will the loose-fitting, rough fabric shirt. She throws them at him, with the empty scroll to put his actual clothes in. He takes them silently with that expressionless face and disappears behind a tree.

She sticks with her usual outfit, sans new cloak. Baggy black cargo pants are very common, no matter what job you have, and her crop top is nothing if not low-class. She's just glad it covers most her identifying marks.

Hair done, eyeliner on point, and outfit on, she turns to Itachi, who waits with a sort of defeated air as she turns to him. She dulls the sharp line of his jaw and the high cheekbones, making his face look a bit rounder. The lines under his eyes disappear, and she draws attention away from them, lining them with nudes and browns. They look wider, more worn.

Then comes a topknot, his hair gently brushed through and combed away from his face. He looks much less like a noble child from a great clan, and more like his family might have worked a food stall.

The final touch is a simple cuff around his exposed wrist, all hard leather and animal teeth. He looks at it strangely.

"I want that back when we're done, kid," she tells him. "Because unless you know what that means, you are advertising false loyalty. The rest you can keep."

He sidles up as she cleans up camp, breaking it down and packing it away, and she tries to inform him of anything that could give him away. Turns out, it's a lot of things.

"Don't make eye contact for too long," she starts, " Avoid using and hand signals, because they mean totally different things in a town like this. Stop standing so straight, and swing your arms a bit more."

He attempts to follow her directions, she'll give him that, but it looks wrong. He has that inborn noble stride, all elegant, not at all like life has been a struggle from the start. She eyes him for a while, starting off at a civilian pace. He follows easy, way too easy.

"No, shit, look. I can do the talking, but watch me. This isn't the Uchiha district, you aren't in Konoha, this isn't a nice place. You have to be like..."

She huffs, and she slips back into her days in Kiri. When she walked the streets with the children, or pushed drugs when she was back in her old world. Leaning back just a bit, and a languid, rhythmic stride. Hands loose and ready by her side, and her eyes scanning slowly. A relaxed, edged expression on her face, like she owns this area, and if you try her, she will tear the skin from your bones.

He studies it for a moment as she moves ahead, and he slips into something similar. More stalking then prowling, but it's almost acceptable.

"Better," she admits, and he follows after her, making their way down the beaten dirt road.

"Don't make conversation, and if someone addresses you, look to me. Remember that you aren't a shinobi here, because though most of the time they are welcome customers, the Mumei don't really like most loyal shinobi."

"Mumei?" he asks, but she shakes her head. He will see.

"We'll be going down some dirty places. I usually wouldn't like to bring you here, or anywhere near here, but this is the type of place I grew up. Watch your possessions, and avoid anyone trying to run into you, or lead you away. The food is going to be sort of gross, and

the people are going to be rough. Do not, and I mean *do not*, fucking try to interfere with other people's business," she instructs, and he keeps his face blank.

She stops the tirade of instructions as they reach the gate, and to his surprise, they even go through it. Sure, she might bribe somebody, and there is a distinct lack of paperwork being shown, but they get through.

Then they keep moving. The main gates flood into heavy foot traffic, leading the way to well-lit show palaces and casinos. Tanzaku's streets are clean here, all glamour and worry free fun. Shops selling wasteful trinkets and overpriced goods jostle for attention with deluxe buffets and eating establishments. Some places even advertise live music players and cinema showings.

It doesn't take long for the thin veneer to melt away.

The woman ahead beside him seems completely comfortable as the clean glass windows give way dirty and grime-covered surfaces, and the trash begins to pile up. The streets begin to turn to some sort of slush that reeks of garbage and feces, and the alleyways they travel begin to fill with unpleasant-looking people. Ramshackle buildings tower overhead, boarded up in a way that screams 'quick fix'.

Eyes scan over the duo, and they look opportunistic and predatory before they land on his cuff, and her own features. Twice now he has witnessed someone turn the other way when they look at her, avoiding her path and moving away. She keeps walking, past smoky, loud liquor rooms, and gambling dens spilling out into the streets.

At some point, scarlet lanterns, unlit in the day time, begin to adorn doorways. A gaggle of children run past, yukata's worn down and faces dirty. They giggle and screech, hurried along by boys and girls he would mark as his own age.

It's one of these she halts, grabbing them gently but firmly by the wrist. The boy whirls on her, anger distinct in his eyes.

"You-!"

She smiles at him, and her head tilts. It's not an entirely pleasant grin, but it seems to give the boy pause when he looks her over, his eyes landing on her hair pin.

His face floods white with shock and she laughs lowly.

"Hime," he gulps, "I'm so sorry-"

"Don't worry about it," she soothes. "Just go tell your aunt to gather everybody up and meet me at Mama Tsuki's."

The child nods vigorously, and she gives him a handful of candy from her bag. He walks backward from her, bowing, and the group of children watches on, something in their eyes like awe.

A nudge from behind reminds him to walk again, and the silence is heavy as they run off to do their job, squabbling over candy. Why hime?

Mama Tsuki's turns out to be a club, its outside walls in need of a good sanding, but the area around it is clear of debris. Watanabe walks through the sliding front door and removes her sandals in the greeting room, which is small and smells heavily of mud and sweet perfumes, before pushing past the gaudy violet curtains into the main room.

A man behind the counter glances up from his work restocking the bar, takes one look at her, and scurries away. He wonders exactly how many people are going to continue to do that, and why, exactly, they seem to behave this way around her.

"Neh, kid," she says, sauntering over to the back, "We have some time before they get here, and so I'm going to admit to some things because I don't think you really have a clue about street rumors or gutter lore."

He follows her without speaking. Life as a respected shinobi and part of a very prestigious clan has separated him from these things. He would never come to this type of place if not for a mission. He has killed people in showrooms like this, dragged secrets from alleyways like the ones they walked through, but Itachi has not lived in them, he has never been part of this life.

She seats herself, and she sprawls over a booth. He notices it seems different from the others, more open-faced, regarding the whole room instead of private and enclosed. She takes a deep breath, and she traces the scar at her throat absentmindedly, her facial features settling into something grim.

"You know about the Bloody Mist, right?" she asks, and he nods. Of course he does.

"Do you know what they called me during the War?"

"The Kiri no Ningyo," he answers, and he senses her easing him into this situation. She's trying to create an atmosphere, make it seem like a series of logical conclusions instead of one big jump.

She nods, her eyes meeting his. "Let me start with what you should know then," she tells him, and there is something foreboding about the tone of her voice.

"Before I was who I am today, I was a no name daughter of a whore, born in a district that makes this one look like a fucking paradise. The Kirigakure I grew up in was a vicious place, one that I hope you never understand," she informs him. Her features narrow and take on a stern, cold appearance as she talks. She does not like the memories she is speaking of, he is sure.

"Children younger than your brother starved on the streets, and were either scooped up into the sex trade, cycled into grunt work, menial labor, or died in the gutters in the snow. The only exception was if you proved yourself, you got to go to the Academy, where you would be placed in an orphanage and got fed three meals a day. If you

were chosen, you counted yourself lucky, regardless if you were given a choice or not."

Itachi is not a dumb person. He can read between the lines. 'If you proved yourself' is very clear to him. Mist looks for certain traits in their forces, and her mention of the sex trade is not missed by him. Neither is the dark, savage look that spreads over her face. She killed before she ever became a ninja, he is entirely sure.

"I grew up, and I lived in one of the nicer brothels, a place almost like this, but Kiri is a hard place, and it has hard ways. When they selected me, it was because I had taken down a grown man who couldn't understand the words 'not for sale' coming out of a four-year-old's mouth. They respected the fact that I mauled him like an animal, but would have let it happen. They had no interest in me before I proved what I could do," she hisses.

Itachi grits his jaw, and he tries to imagine such a place. Such a strength-oriented nation, filled with people who would allow something like that. Four, he thinks, just four. Younger than Sasuke.

He swallows dryly, and thinks that nothing he could say would help now.

"After recruitment, I was trained up, but I didn't forget where I came from. People shouldn't be treated the way they were in the Mist. There shouldn't be such an inconceivably large class divide, where those without training died in droves to support a war-force. There should be consequences if you murder someone for entertainment in their home, or on the street. Rape should not be ignored, and people should not look like skeletons hung with skin. Taxation should not be disproportionate on those who already struggle to live, and children should have options other than sex, near slavery, recruitment, or death, regardless of their parentage. The truth I came to was that people deserved choices," she says. "I won't lie and say I'm selfless. I did what I did because I also felt trapped, beaten, and broken down. I was forced into a system that told me I had to murder other children to prove myself, and then forced into a war I had no part in

causing. If I said no, if I questioned it, I would have been culled from the herd. If I grew too strong, stood above my birth station, I would be disposed of. The system I grew up in fostered isolation, distrust, and violence beyond measure."

It's different hearing a firsthand experience than reading a report. Her file said none of this, it simply outlined facts one right after another. It listed events that took place, but it did not give motivation, or circumstance.

"I did what I could with what I had. I tried to forget that my teachers watched as Zabuza slaughtered the whole school in order to prove himself. I tried to forget that they watched as I tried to do the same to him. I pushed away the fact that they sent a seven year old more suited to mid-range fighting to the front lines in a assault unit, and that they never gave me a teacher. I had my team, and they drove me, they trained me, they kept me sane for as long as they could. For that, I will always love them."

The admission surprises him a small amount. He knew of the Kaijuu no Kiri, but to hear her admission, he wonders. Do they know? That after six years, she still cares for them? Do they care for her?

She breathes in, and he feels the tension rise.

"But I'm not strong, Itachi, and they deserved better to watch me fall apart. There came one final action that broke me, and I turned. I think for a while I lost my mind. When I said I never forgot my roots, I meant it. For years I taught the street children everything I knew about how to survive. I taught them how to feed themselves, how to shelter in the wet and cold. I taught them that they deserved more, that love and kindness did not have to be an illusion. I did everything I could to give them choices, and when the time came, we helped each other fly free."

Her face settles into determined expression, her eyes boring into his.

"I gave them weapons, and told them how to do it. Together, we turned the tide, and we burned Kirigakure to the ground when the main forces were out at war. I took them, and the people they grew up into, everybody I could gather really, and we fled," she tells him flatly.

Her husky voice seems to resonate in his head like a bad echo, and even he, as skilled as he is, cannot stop the widening of his eyes or the sharp intake of breath. How? How could she have burned an entire city to the ground at such a young age? Kiri rivaled Konoha in strength once, not too long ago. Its vicious training methods and ruthless tactics proved to be successful in producing uncommonly strong ninja who fought like beasts. They were strong because of their rigorous search for strength, and their severe methods in obtaining it. They produced ruthless, cutthroat, savage ninja who could push themselves to places that others thought were impossible, and they dug their own graves with their practices. In their push to produce strength and ruthlessness, they forgot to encourage loyalty.

It fits, he thinks to himself. Her unreasonably high bounty, the blackout in Kiri, the influx of refugees around the nations, and her absence for years before her re-emergence. She wasn't just healing from defection or detainment, she was settling a population, hiding them among the masses. She was building an empire, and training to lead them.

The woman sitting in front of him successfully pulled off the biggest defection in history, and she brought an uncounted number of people with her.

"The Mumei," he whispers, and she nods.

"That's what they called themselves. It started out with the group from Kiri, but it grew. I won't say how many, or where, but it turns out that there's a lot of people in the world who need to be reminded that they are worth existing. Even more need just a small nudge to really start growing," she tells him. He reads her, and he reassesses what

he knows. An innate need to help people, he thinks. Help them by noticing them, by hiding them and sheltering them. Helping them by teaching them how to care for themselves, and teaching them how to teach others. By nourishing them.

Helping them by destroying the system that stood in their way, killing an unknown amount of people. Helping them by allowing them to spread out and take resources, by blackmailing and murdering those who threatened them. Helping them by... by politicking with greater nations.

This is what Konoha wants. Not a simple spy or informant. They want the mind that planned this out, that could drive such a large change and influence so many.

"In particular though, most know the three noble clans of Water to be dead, or nearly so," she says, nonchalantly looking up from the booth to the doorway. He reels inside his mind, but his expression is well kept and devoid of any tells.

White cloth peeks through the curtains, and a slim, willowy arm moves them aside. Pale skin and clear eyes comb the room and land on the missing nin before the figure waves more inside.

There are four here, two of them boys little older than Itachi himself. Each wears a shroud over their faces, their noses and hair covered by cloths for a moment before they withdraw their shawls.

Itachi feels like he has definitely uncovered more than he could imagine.

Yuki, he thinks, staring at the brown-haired duo with pale, strong arms. His eyes flick over to the white hair of the next two, and his surprise merges with hope. They are Kaguya. He knows them, has gone over the histories of each nation, and the great clans that began them.

The noble Clans of Water Country are not dead, killed of by the fearful masses or the purges, he thinks faintly, they are hidden. Hidden by the one who outreached her hand to him, the one whose help can slaughter hundreds, and save them too.

Her love, he thinks, is a dangerous thing.

"Ryuu-hime," the Yuki woman greets in a low, harmonic voice.

"I have a shipment for you," Watanabe says with a smile, her demeanor changing. She looks pleased to see them.

A puzzled expression takes over the ice user's features.

"We had no orders," she comments, but Watanabe flips through her bag and presents a scroll anyway. They approach, eyeing him warily, before unsealing it. The teenager behind the woman makes a delighted yip, and the Kaguya boy nudges him.

"I figured, hey, while I was around the area, why not?" she says calmly, but Itachi can see not only a box that smells distinctly of medicinal herbs, but several packages marked with seals, and something that smells like pickled fish.

He turns to it and tries to make out the contents of the jar. They are indeed pickled fish. He slides his gaze over to Ryuishi, a judging expression on his face.

She grins and flutters her fingers in a strange fashion. Who is she to judge the palates of the clans? Nobody, that's who. Mostly because pickled fish are strangely appetizing in a way they should not be. She just wonders if he noticed the steel maker's mark on the other packages, but she figures that at this point, he could fuck her over pretty hard anyway. He won't though, because he knows for a fact she will kill Sasuke and fuck over Konoha as hard as she can.

Which would be way harder than saying it. Like, woah would it be hard. She can maybe destabilize some economics, but she doesn't

have a huge military force and she sort of doubts they would be on board. Probably would be, considering that he would be inadvertently screwing them over as well, but hey. Gambling.

Hello, risky life choices, she thinks, I have not missed you.

"Any problems with the locals?" she asks, sending the stone-faced child an appraising gaze. He really has a perfect poker face. Like, scary good. This whole time she has been her talking to a mask, save for a few very small gasps and some eye ticks, but nothing huge. He's going to be magnificent when he grows up.

"We have asserted our presence and taken ground," the Kaguya supplies in a high, tinkling voice, "The local gangs tested us, but as we have no interest in their business, they remain clear of ours."

Ryuishi understands that statement to say 'we took what was desired, then stopped to maintain our hold. Use of some force necessary, but none so much to draw attention.'

How nice. She likes the Tanzaku sect. They aren't sycophantic, or completely disrespectful. Between them there is a healthy working relationship, mostly due to the fact that they have acknowledge her as a person, and not perfect, but still respect her abilities to manage things and treat them with the respect they have earned. It doesn't hurt that she keeps them supplied with things they might miss from clan life. Those robes they wear didn't come cheap, and pickled fish had to be smuggled in at Wave. She also has the secret belief that women from the clan may have chafed under patriarchal values a little, and enjoy stretching their wings.

In other words, the Yuki and Kaguya women in front of her did their duty and bore sons, which they love, but they are not exactly lovers of the male anatomy. They do make a beautiful couple together, though. A beautiful, terrifyingly capable couple that lived through arranged marriage and the Mist together.

Count Ryuishi jealous.

They give their reports, and she makes sure to ask about taxes. Ten percent may seem like much, but it covers medical expenses and security, not to mention relocation if necessary. Those things don't come cheap.

Trade usually goes by income earned and advice given. It's... all math to her. She has the theory down, but Kagami has the numbers on this. She likes to check up with the locals to make sure that the matron isn't being a douche, though.

They four of them leave, content with their gifts and reports. She'll check in with others in the area before she goes, but a certain child needs her attention.

... And so does her stomach. She's finally getting her appetite back, which is awesome. *Soon*, she promises it, *but not now*.

She turns, and drapes over her seat once more. This was one hell of a power display, if she does say so herself, but Itachi is a bright child. He's going to need more.

That's fine. She has more.

"This doesn't explain how you knew, " he intones darkly. She waves her hand. She has already shown a few cards. He has no need to know exactly the depths that the Mumei go to.

"You're right, Itachi-san, but it gives you leverage. A secret for a secret," she replies. He doesn't acknowledge it, she knows she is correct.

"The Uchiha will not work for you," he whispers, and she gives him a withering look.

"You're being obtuse. In the future, any hint of Uchiha will become something everybody seeks out. I don't have the power of a Hidden Village to back me and hide them, and I won't risk turning an entire established nation against me, not to mention every admirer or

grudge wielder. I'm a transport service, not an end goal," she corrects.

His eyes darken considerably, and he leans in close. "What can you do?" he asks, and she sends him a sad glance. A child, that's what he is. She wishes she could treat him like one, wishes she was allowed to.

"There's a coup in place, and your Kage knows about it. Diplomacy is failing, little by little, and so are chances for a peaceful resolution. You're trying to balance it out, to find the plants and keep both sides alive, but it's not going to work Itachi," she tells him gravely. "I can do exactly what I said before. I can take the ones too young to remember, and I can put them somewhere far, far away."

He watches her, searching her face. Something seems to shatter, just below the surface, and she wants to comfort him.

"You know," he states, and she nods her head. Even if events go differently than canon, she can see it in her mind's eye. She is here for a reason.

Ryuishi is intelligent, and she can see the paths available. She can read the mood and watch from twenty different perspectives, all in moments. She did not become Rakki Ryuu because of her raw strength or her ability to drown her enemies, she did it because she set a plan in action and nurtured it for *years*. She is here today because she can plan ahead, and she can adapt.

Doesn't stop her from being impulsively dumb though, she will admit that.

"Either the Uchiha preemptively strike, and they deal Konoha a heavy blow because of their positions and plants. Against the Hyuuga, Nara, Yamanaka, Akimichi, Aburame, and individual forces, they will be slaughtered. They lose not only their power base, but supplies, shelter, comfort, food, and water. The village won't give these to an enemy. If somehow, they keep the peace, there will be

tension until marriages or alliances pull them back in, or they dwindle down and snap again. If they manage a takeover, miraculously, they can never trust anybody ever again, and nobody will trust them. Konoha has the manpower, the intelligence, the numbers, the money, the raw supplies, and the technology. The Uchiha couldn't hope to take over in one fell swoop. They should have played a longer game, spanning generations out of mind," she answers honestly, and she can see him flinch. She never planned a war force, she won because she hit and ran.

He takes a heavy breath, and seems to look around them. She has no doubt he would have scoped this place out before, but no one is listening, not even Orochimaru. Her bag is coated with a thin layer of her chakra, and so is the booth. The good thing about having Void Chakra is that nobody wants to acknowledge its existence, and hate looking at it for too long. If somebody forced themselves they could find them in a heartbeat, sickness aside, but around them is an empty showroom. Nobody expects anyone in here.

"How?" he asks again, and she feels horrible, but she pushes on.

"When the time is right, you call me. You have summons, right?" she asks, and he nods.

"Crows," he tells her.

"Use them. I can hang around and keep a special eye out, but I can't linger for too long in one place. The Naka shrine is about half a kilometer from a river," she continues.

"In the training fields, it runs through the wall," he states, and she smirks.

"It does indeed. Place the children in carriers, and I can ferry them along to the outside from in the water. You can follow me every step of the way."

He breathes in softly, and she lets him have a moment of silence. This can't be easy for him, she knows it hurts.

"From there I actually lay several fake trails, just in case. It will be full blackout for us though, and we take the children, assuming there is less than ten under the ages of three, and we head north. We bring them to the border town, and I alert my contacts."

"My contact is somebody I would trust with my life. Somebody who I *have* trusted with my life, and she is loyal beyond reason. When we give them to her, she will bring them to the Land of Iron. They won't be nobles, and it might be hard, but they have a chance at life, Itachi-san."

He looks up from the table, and there is some unreadable motion in his eyes. It's hard to decipher what he is thinking, and she wants him to have somebody else with him, somebody there for him other than just himself.

"What kind of life?" he asks quietly.

She takes a moment to think about it and speaks honestly. "A civilian one. They aren't a samurai clan, and they won't be accepted as anything but lower ranks if they work very, very hard for it. Most likely they'll be shop owners, or cooks or servers. They'll lead whatever life they choose along simpler lines. The chance they ever find out they are Uchiha is slim as well. Iron is firm in its samurai clans, and their territories are well established. They don't allow ninja inside their borders except to negotiate in times of war, and samurai are bound by honor to defend the lands and people of their lords. The biggest stress is keeping shinobi and kunoichi out. A slim chance of activating the Sharingan," she informs him. No glitz, no glamour. If the Uchiha clan wants to continue, it runs the risk of having to forsake its pride for survival.

He seems to go into some sort of trance, his eyes open but uncomprehending. It's freaking her out, in all honesty. He looks strange, almost deathly pale, his long lashes framing his dark eyes.

"What do you gain?" he asks suddenly, searching her face. "If anyone finds out, they will hunt you even more than they do now. You gave me a secret for a secret, mutually assured destruction, but what do you gain?"

She takes a deep breath, and finds her resolve. There is more than helping out children. There is a piece of her heart, someone she cannot reach without him.

"You are smart, a genius, a prodigy. You excel in ways that surpass me, and you will only continue to grow. If you find yourself not allied, gone rogue, an organization will ask you to join them," she informs him breathlessly. "They won't take me, and our goals are different, but they will take you. There is a man there, a swordsman from the mist with blue skin and small eyes, you can't miss him."

He sharpens his gaze, and he takes note of the pleading quality to her voice, the desperate yearning for something out of her reach. There is quiet resolve, and the acceptance of something cruel.

"He hates me, I'm sure, but he is a good man Itachi-san," she tells him. "The other one I can handle, but he... Please, watch over him for me. Keep him safe. After everything is said and done, just keep him safe."

He knows exactly who she speaks of. Knows his dossier, filed next to hers. The group that he led, the Kaijuu no Kiri. Hoshigaki Kisame, one of the ones she admitted to still caring for.

Here she sits, willing to shake the world and offering herself with no other reason than to see him safe. She is involving herself in treachery and life threatening endeavors, for something he will never know about. Her goal in this, something without price, is his well being.

He thinks of Sasuke, and the promise he will pull from his village for his brother. He thinks of the things he will do for his sibling, and the things she is doing for those who she loves.

He takes it back.

It is both of them who care too deeply, who dream too much, who yearn for something better. She is not alone in her devotion.

The love she and him have for their precious people, he thinks, is a dangerous thing.

AN: A couple of things here I want to point out. One is that Ryuishi doesn't want to like Kakashi, but she can't help indulging herself. Two is that Itachi, at this point, is very young and has absolutely no fucking choice but complete death or this. He is stuck between a rock and a hard place, and she is doing the very least she can, and she's sticking her neck out pretty far. Not only that, but the genius knows that for all her bluff, he has a good chance of cutting her down if she is lying, and she offered to take him with her. He is considering it only because she is being so open with him, and she has displayed an impressive amount of sway and capabilities.

That being said, she has also enacted the age old Mutually Assured Destruction. Ryuishi is a morally grey character, and if Itachi attempts to double cross her, she will do her very best to move mountains and make him regret it with every fiber of her being. They will both crumble, together.

If you have questions, feel free to ask me. I would love to discuss the schematics of this event. I also said earlier I might make a separate story for the second half of this fic, but upon further thinking, my word count isn't actually crazy high compared to some. I think I might be okay.

I want to thank my readers, my favoriters, and my followers. Bless you guys. As for my reviewers, each time I try and write something down, I seriously cannot express how happy it makes me when you leave me reviews. Thank you.

My beta Enbi deserves all the praise in the world, and I am lucky to have them. That being said, they wanted me to put this in here.

A quick note from me to the readers: I'm sorry if there are mistakes, I edited this quickly because I'm currently very busy. Please be patient with me .

I say, no need for that, after all, if you guys can see any mistakes, imagine the amount she has to deal with regularly.

Question:Do you think, if pushed into a corner, Ryuishi could actually kill a child, or was she bluffing? OR What are some drawbacks you see with this plan? OR What would the world be like if Ryuishi decided to stay in Kiri and run things from there?

Meeting Influence

I do not own Naruto.

A sandaled foot touches the hard, unforgiving floor. It makes no sound, not the slightest puff of air displaced, or weight proportioned wrong. Another follows it, no less graceful than the last. The shadows on the dark stone walls tremble as the slightest of breezes shakes the burning torches and yellow flames shiver as they cast their light, shying away from the air current.

The only noise that fills the long corridor is the rustling of cloth against stone, the sound of a body being dragged along at a fluid, steady pace. The body's head lolls off to one side, their hair brushing along a tanned hand that is clasped around their collar, and their limbs lag like sacks of grain against the pull.

Ryuishi will say that this chick is, indeed, a heavy fucker. No doubt about it, but she put up a hell of a fight before she succumbed. Ryuishi has the bruises to prove it. The dislocated hip is back in place at least. That had taken three clones to shove back into joint. But all well worth it, she thinks. After all, this lady was a prize and a half, a clan member from Iwa. She could hide from the forces Orochimaru was gathering, but she couldn't hide from Ryuishi's meticulous background checks and impeccable information network.

Now, she will be Orochimaru's gift. Ryuishi had to work hard to find something to pay him back for his information on Gaara, and now she could. A Kamizuru bee user from the mountains, her body filled with stinging insects. Much less terrifying than beetles, but a bitch and a half to subdue. She hopes the gift will be appreciated.

She travels the maze of hallways without care, her eyes scanning restlessly. There is a strange itch under her skin as time goes on and she sees her boys less and less. There is work to be done

everywhere she looks. Otogakure is almost ready to begin its ascent into the ranks of the Hidden Villages. The Daimyo has given his blessing, the people of Rice have been swayed, and production has been secured. The trade she has nurtured is growing into a sprawling expanse of economic gain at a slow but steady pace, and Grass is on the verge of rioting, distracting everybody from the rising star to the east.

Not only that, but she's been avoiding Hatake and Konoha as she prepares for the Uchiha Massacre. Attempting to talk about what she knows will happen without sounding like a psychopath is hard. How do you inform a boy he will run into someone who should have died thirty years ago, at most? How do you tell him to watch out for his elders, and that he needs to desecrate the bodies of his family further by destroying their eyes so that Danzo can be stopped before he even begins?

The answer is carefully, and also fire. Fire would eat at the compound and destroy soft tissue in a short amount of time. Fire would hypothetically eat at the bodies of the children, leaving only ashes instead of empty cradles. It would distract any followers, and hide their scent, all while being the trademark of the clan. Poetic irony at its finest. Of course, fire would also alert the populace if set too soon, and she can't sell it to Itachi. He refuses, even though she offered to set it herself.

Hiding this all from Orochimaru's own spies is not easy, and they keep having to meet while he is sent on missions. It's entirely too much effort to continue concealing herself from Itachi's new team, and keeping pace is equally demanding. No one can know of her involvement, especially Orochimaru. If he discovers she had a chance to deliver him young, infant Uchiha he could raise from the start, and she didn't take it, the consequences would be dire. He would see it as a betrayal, and respond in kind.

Orochimaru is the one person she cannot afford to piss off. It can't happen, *ever*.

It's a good thing they work so well together, and that she's willing to compromise like him. Still, it leaves a bitter taste in her mouth at times. She knows she is condemning this woman to a slow death at the hands of unethical experimentation. He will draw the skin from her flesh, the blood from her body, and the marrow from her bones. He will do everything he ever did to Ryuishi to this woman, and then he will do even more if she does not submit to him.

Ryuishi is not deluded. Orochimaru is twisted and has no morals, with a megalomania-driven superiority complex that grates on her nerves like little else can. She knows he does horrible, unspeakable things. She knows that he murders for expediency, and has no qualms about using children for labor and war.

Ryuishi knows that Orochimaru is not a good person.

She also knows that she isn't one either.

She glides along, turning left, then right, then right again. A door, bland and grey, comes into view at the end of the hall. She takes a deep breath and pushes through it. The people in the room stop and stare, all of them ninja he has gathered to serve him. Their flinty eyes watch her with appalled shock, but a few watch nod their heads in respect. These are loyal vassals to the man sitting before them, and they know his partner.

Orochimaru's burning golden eyes are locked onto her, an amused smirk playing on his lips.

"I'm home," she singsongs. "And I brought you a present."

One of the women steps forward, and Ryuishi finds herself utterly unimpressed with her. She must be new here, and eager to prove herself. If she was more experienced she might know Orochimaru took care of those who disrespected him with his own hands.

"Who are you?" she demands. The ex-Mist-nin snorts, loping over to Orochimaru's side, leaving the prone clan member's form at his feet.

"A Kamizuru, still 'live and kickin'. Or, she would be, if I hadn't... you know," she states, ignoring the fuming woman. A man steps forward and drags her back, whispering in her ear and casting his gaze on them. She doesn't want to feel satisfied with the fear in his eyes, but she won't lie to herself about this one.

"How thoughtful," the pale man rasps. "Such a pretty gift after such a long absence."

She can hear the reprimand in his voice, but she doesn't flinch from it, not anymore. If he wanted her dead, she would be. "I couldn't face a friend who helped me without returning a gift in kind," she states, smiling. Positive reinforcement all the way through.

"And here I thought the lumber from Fire was the gift," he drawls, and she looks at him in surprise.

"That's me doing my job, pulling my weight and all that. Gotta build somehow, we both know it," she returns. Orochimaru might be prideful enough to spend an excessive amount of money on stone and cement buildings, but she isn't. If he won't work with traders from Fire, she will.

"I hope they have been... secured?" he asks, and she rolls her eyes. Of course she didn't just ask them to ship it straight to Rice. It's going up through Earth, down through Fire again, and then through Hot Water before it gets here. What does he think she is, an amateur?

"Have a little faith, Orochimaru," she says, settling herself to stand beside him. "I mean, I've proven myself so far."

He gives her a once over, taking in her weariness, but also the strength inside her form. He was concerned she had been being lazy, not sticking to his training regimen without prompting, or being excessively sentimental again. Instead, she has secured not only a specialty clan member, but word has reached him that she has her hands full of budding progress. The Land of Rivers is secured and

loyal to her name after she furthered her image repairing homes and distributing crops.

Not only that, but she seems to have set up some sort of basic groundwork, organizing those who said they worked in her name, and forcing them to abide by their words. Several young medics have begun circulating in the area, proficient in treating common ailments and injuries, if not the life threatening trauma that comes from battle. Medicine is just sprouting in the territory, and she devised a new method of traveling the river ways that allowed for more cargo. A flat bottomed boat that made for a large target, but carried a heavy load in shallow waters.

Grass is churning with her social experiment. The higher education has given the people some thoughts about their treatment and neglect in favour of the Ninja, and the local feudal lord has his hands full dealing with them, stating his inborn right to rule. If not for her squadrons of clan users, that country would be as big of a mess as Kiri, but she manages something between war and peace. Struggle without violence, and progress without complete stagnation.

It doubles as a distraction, taking eyes away from Rice, and also drawing the Akatsuki's gaze. They share a border with Grass, and they are wary of the troubles going on.

To complete it, he has heard rumors of her growing effect on the jinchuuriki child in Suna. He is sure she is compromised with her affections, but the hint of such a weapon in the palm of her hand, and in extent, his own... well, it is a gratifying aspect.

"I suppose you have proved useful," he states, and she smiles at him, thin and sly. He can see the promise of information inside them, the secrets she will confide to him later. His own grin is pleased.

Six years ago, he gambled, and today, he is still reaping the rewards.

"Careful," she murmurs with a wry grin, "I might actually think you like me."

He hums back and motions toward a a few of the lower ranking officers to drag the Kamizuru woman away for further examination. He has a small curiosity for the biology of the clan, as well as the primordial hive mind they tend to share. It is pleasant to know that he will be able to sate that interest.

His grin lingers as she turns away to prepare for her stay, the ninja in the room watching her with wide eyes, startled by her familiarity with their ruler.

Such a prize, he thinks, one that continues to grow even more valuable as time goes on.

Orochimaru finds her lounging across a nest of cushions, still damp from the baths, picking food from the bowl in front of her. She looks up slowly, a plump slice of strawberry caught between her lips. She sucks in the berry and swallows it down, casting a fond smile at him. Ah, sentiment. She has so much of it.

He takes a moment to remember the underfed, rail-thin child he first met all those years ago, struggling to find her place, searching for a way out of a mess of blood, and the dangers of mist. Too clever for her place in life, and reaching for something beyond her. He recalls the shattering hallucinations, and her savage, unpolished skill. She survived by luck and manipulation alone.

Now she is nearly a woman grown, lithe and well formed. Her intelligence bloomed, and her plots were given room to spread out and succeed. She shattered the chains holding her down to her village, and she overcame her weakness. She learned, and she adapted.

A sensation of pride fills him. He saw her potential, and he made her work toward it. He shaped her, and pieced her back together. No one else.

"You require more sustenance than berries," he informs her. "Your penchant for sweets is as unhealthy as ever."

She sighs, and the smile slips into a pout. Such a skillful display of emotion when he knows she does not actually care. "I haven't seen you in months, and the first thing you do is reprimand me for my eating choices?" she says.

"Better than wasting my time performing subtle dominance displays in a room full of subordinates," he rasps back, pinning her with a stare.

"Okay, I can see how waltzing over to your side with a body might be taken as such, but I honestly was kind of tired of carrying-"

"Dragging."

"-of dragging that fucking lady around and I didn't know where you wanted her," she finishes smoothly, as if he hadn't interrupted her.

He wordlessly settles himself across from her, allowing her to review her own actions in her head. She may be telling the truth, but it is a half truth. They both know it. There are no tells on her face that give her away. No twitching or tapping of limbs, but she knows. He is sure of it.

"I doesn't matter anyway. If I wanted to assert my dominance among your collection of misfits, I would do power displays, not showcase my connection with you. Train beside them, recite their biggest secrets out loud, undermine their founding beliefs, you know, the works," she admits, staring at the bowl of berries in front of her, running a hand through her loose hair. It is beginning to be unruly. He will see it trimmed before she leaves.

"I didn't come here to establish the hierarchy though. There are some things I thought you might find interesting," she states, her eyelids sliding down, half-lidded.

He hums low in his throat, prompting her to continue.

"News is arriving that Yugakure is attempting to raise profits by marketing itself as a tourist attraction and planning to de-arm. They don't have a numerous army, and some of their ninja will become a police force, but the opportunity is there for you to recruit some members. I know the northern hideout remains sparse, as does your island fortification."

Orochimaru watches her closely, but does not doubt the truth behind her words. It is an intelligent move by the minor feudal lord of the country. After all, Yugakure was not known for taking in many missions, and continuing to train ninja that had no purpose was foolish at best. He could help those lost ninja find their purpose.

He also knows of her recent visit to the area, centered around collecting information on the shinobi and kunoichi. There are files composed for his perusal, but most center around a white haired male with purple eyes. She hoards it, as if waiting for something to happen before turning it over.

"Not to mention, as our influence on base production and trade grows, we are making much more profit than expected, even counting the expenditures for weapons, ninja, mumei, training, education, medical, bunking, food, water, and construction. Hell, even your research is funded just fine," she rattles off, eyeing him carefully.

"Do not waste my time by telling me what I already know," he instructs, warning her to make her point.

"We have room for expansion, but we can't draw attention to ourselves. As you recruit more people and... what was it? Oh yes, '*Gather skilled ninja and assist them find their purpose in life without being beholden to the fickle and warmongering priorities of the Five Shinobi Countries*' -great public representation by the way-we need to also allow the civilian sector to grow. I suggest a large place of

gathering, with many lecture halls, free to attend, where classes can be taught and attended on a broad scope of subjects," she explains.

Ah, higher education. Only, free to attend, and also willing to take volunteer teachers. More loosely than an actual structured school, open to almost anybody willing to participate. Then you have an increase of knowledge in general, an enriched culture, and something that binds the people together more than just fear and tradition, not to mention a striking blow against the caste system.

As time passes by, there needs to be a unifying factor among the sects that they create. That unifying factor could be this place, where sex workers, farmers, traders, general laborers, retail workers, business owners, and ninja come together to poke around at what strikes their curiosity. Where civilians learn that ninja are people, and ninja learn the value of civilians.

In her old world, Japan took to new ideas like a duck to water. The Meiji Restoration was rapid and unstoppable, propelling Japan into the modern age in a very short time span. Here, she is working toward something similar, only it becomes harder with an espionage based system surrounding her people. The flow of information is the lifeblood of this world, and the Elemental countries are wary of the new philosophy of the Mumei. The shogunate like system is acting similar to The United States in the Cold War, limiting exposure to the rogue elements, attempting to re-affirm the established ideas.

Orochimaru seems intrigued, and also smug, the bastard. "You seek to recreate something from your past," he says, mirth in his sibilant voice, "A college, or at least a similar ideal, correct?"

The foreign word on his tongue makes her flinch, as does the subject matter. He really is a genius, she thinks. "Yes, but it still works," she admits, meeting his golden eyes, "as does the idea of a small haven of our own, for our people. Not a big town or a large target, but not a hideout either."

He hums, considering it. His fortifications can be hidden and moved. The number of them, and their distributed nature means that even if one is discovered and destroyed, there will always be another to slip back to and reform from. Not everything will be lost if he loses just one settlement, but hers would become a weakness to exploit should they step wrong.

However, she makes a logical argument that a stronger sense of culture and community can increase work ethic and moral.

"It's a target," he rasps, "a weakness."

"Not if we allow more than our own inside. Foreign traders and travelers would be welcome. Establishing it as a melting pot for not only our people, but the world at large, means that attacking it makes it offensive to everyone involved," she fires back.

It takes him seconds to connect the dots, instead of the years she spent planning this out. Sometimes she thinks it's frightening to see how smart he is.

"A chaotic neutral in a controlled environment, allowing your ideas to spread further. Even with spies among the ranks, they can report nothing of use other than the curriculum and interactions among the populace. It's defense lies not only in the civilian nature of it, but also because of the diversity of people involved," he states, a sly smile on his lips. "Add it to the power you have garnered from establishing your work successfully advising merchants and gaining them more profits, as well as your own loyal followers, and you solidify yourself as an established power."

"True," she drawls, "but I am only half of the equation. Your work at politicking matches my own, and you provide the medical aspect of the society, as well as a large majority of militaristic and peace keeping forces. You provide the muscle that allows this to not be absorbed into a larger nation, taken out by the roaming gangs of bandits, or be squashed out completely. You are the muscle to my money."

"I am more than that," he responds, prompting her to think even further. A slow, thoughtful expression converges over her face, before it is replaced by one of realization.

"Ah," she states quietly. "Your acceptance into to the royal courts means you also can navigate the upper echelons of society, where I cannot. You can reach the nobles, and give people the connection to their history in ways I am not able too."

He nods. "Correct, though the profits they see from your workings in trade and production give my work all the more weight," he admits.

For a moment, silence reigns. Coming from him, it is a heavy admission that her business helps his own, and she treasures it. They've started something together, a half baked idea that began long ago in the barren streets of Mist. Without his direction and support, it would have collapsed under the weight of her own ambition, but his care has helped it grow into into something capable.

Otogakure will be something more than it was in canon. It won't be a collection of hidey-holes and experimental soldiers. It will be an economic hub, and epicenter for growth.

Something warm blossoms in her chest, a fondness for the horrible man in front of her. He may be a monster with no understanding for morals, and he might have no sense of common decency, but he has never been ignorant or stubborn. He's adaptable, and he's seen the value of her ideas perhaps not in an ethical sense, but in a pragmatic one.

Even if he is a mad scientist, and a cold bastard, Orochimaru is a good leader. He can scheme like no other, and he knows how to satisfy his people.

"I'm glad you were never made Hokage," she says quietly, and his eyes sharpen and burn with warning. "You would have made a good one, but you are going to make and even better leader here," she

whispers, smiling at him, "You started with ash and dust, and you built everything with your own two hands. You didn't need the work of predecessors, or the Will of Fire."

He seems to calm, listening with a blank, calculating face. In the low light, his serpentine features stand out even more, and she find them simultaneously intimidating and beautiful.

"I may not like the leaders of the Elemental nations, and we might not always agree. Sometimes I find you too cold and cruel, and the ninja system seems appalling to me at times. I may struggle with your ideals, and your ways, but I can't deny that you will make a fine Otokage."

The title makes him pause, and a slow smile creeps over his thin, pale lips. It is something she has rarely seen, and it is... kinda scary actually. Like, it's aesthetically pleasing, but it also gives her the sense that he's about to eat her heart. *Only fuckin' Orochimaru can make a smile also seem like an attack*, she thinks.

"Such barbed flattery," he hisses. "Be careful, or I might believe you actually have grown affectionate of me."

She rolls her eyes and starts eating the strawberries again, just to spite him. Throwing her words back in her face like that. That's low. "Wouldn't want that," she snarks, "Then we might fuckin' end up partners or something."

He chuckles in response, and the sound reminds her of sand against stone, or the scrape of scales across tree bark.

Higher powers that be help her, she might actually kind of like the vile, twisted, evil bastard.

It takes an obscene amount of time to locate her 'contact to the Land of Iron'. She started a while back, sending out the very, very subtle messages, dropping all the right signs, using just the right words.

What does it say about her when she can hardly find the Tribe she started? Good things, actually. The largest roaming band of Mumei is a wraith-like group, flitting around unseen across the entire continent. If their own founder can barely track them, it means that no one else even stands a chance. In fact, she hadn't even tracked them down. She had to wait for them to answer the call, months after she first started.

She gets the message from Kagami, who gets it from a group in Rivers, who gets it from a brothel in Rice, who gets it from a splinter group in Grass. The chain gets even most obscure and vague from there, and it goes on and on and on, full of dead ends and leads gone cold. She knew that the Tribe from Mist was paranoid and beyond cautious, but this is some next level shit.

It makes her grin in pride when she finally gets the message, though. Sneaky, clever little shits, the whole lot of them.

Following the instructions they left actually takes her to no-man's land. An empty place between Waterfall and Rice that is ruled by thieving, treacherous gangs of bandits and deserters, hiding from the Elemental Countries and persecution.

In a way it makes sense that they would stop here for her, because not many allied ninja make use of this place other than to travel through it. She knows that long, long ago some serious shit happened in the densely jungled and forested environment, and it is still obvious today.

To the north, there are places where even she hesitates to travel. It is too savage, ruled by giant beasts and the strongest of the missing-nin. A place called The Mountain's Graveyard prickles inside her memories and sets off alarms inside her head.

Orochimaru traveled there once, she thinks. One of the very, very few to ever make it back from his encounters. He described the skeletal remains of giants poking through the canopy, so large they had to viewed from the sky to be seen in whole, and obliterated

landscapes. Mountains torn down to ragged canyons and peaks, and swathes of land dipping in places as if struck by meteorites. Barren clearings burned long ago and still filled with ash.

Crossing the border already sets her on edge. Sure, she can hide and evade with the best of them, but there is something about the towering trees that reminds her of Training Ground 44 or Kirigakure. The land is coated in some thick, dense energy that oozes strange intent. She can't get a read on it, and it's making her nervous. If the Village Hidden in Mist is like Silent Hill, and the Forest of Death is like Jumanji, than this place is like the more green version of the Slenderman games. There is an eeriness to the foliage, like it's watching her. It feels older than time, and there are spaces here that remind her of ruins and ghost towns. A strange emptiness, like a cemetery.

Ryuishi is beyond careful as she passes through, wary of old folklore her mother used to tell her.

Spirits in the trees, she thinks, and ghosts in the stones . This place was a battleground, and its soil is soaked in blood and anguish.

She knows it's getting to her too, but she can't stop it. She's afraid of this place. It scares her like an environment should not. It makes her feel small and lost, and even the beast inside her head growls with wariness.

Ryuishi is not especially superstitious, but she can't say she's 100% logical as well. For some reason the chittering of animals, the lingering, almost smoky mists, and the rustling of leaves reminds her of legends from the islands told by her great aunts. The one where serpents rose from the seas and created the earth, and spread across the skies to form the rainbow, destined to never meet. It smacks of shrunken heads and birds of paradise, and she finds herself regressing back to the old rituals she hasn't taken part of in a long, long time.

"I am nobody, I am nothing," she prays under her breath, "I am a teardrop in a river, and a river in the sea. Let those who passed and shared my blood protect and guard me." The words around the tiny box of fire do little to help her, but they embolden her just a bit.

Whatever it is about this land, it lingers with her, tickling her senses and aggravating that gnawing Void inside her. There is a hollowness that creeps through her mind, a muffling blanket of blankness cast over her thoughts. It makes her feel inhuman. Even as she reaches the meeting point, there is a numb tranquility about her that she can't like or dislike.

The encampment is varied, and it should feel exotic and fill her with pride, but she looks around and it feels distant. The traveling shelters made from carefully picked earth tones and natural sources blend in well with the surroundings, and it feels strange to look at them. They remind her of a strange cross between the tribal villages of her old earth, and the nomadic tribes of Suna. There is livestock here as well, ranging between temporary abodes, small meat sources. The tiny pigs native to Stone, their backs bristling with fur, only ever growing around seventy pounds at max. Small enough to be carried, and tame enough to be relatively quiet. A few dogs, mutt breeds without names, watch her with yellow eyes as she nears the huts, and people begin to notice her as well.

She wonders what they must think of her, stepping out of the wispy mist and trees and onto the grassy, muddy terrain of their current settlement. What does she look like to them, with her scar-ridden limbs and her distant, empty eyes?

A man stares at her, and she remembers him vaguely, his noodle stall in Kiri where her team used to eat. She remembers his lanky, thin body and his blue eyes. Now he is older, no longer a young teen, and his body is filled out from proper nutrition, his left sleeve empty below the elbow. He smiles, and she remembers that smile set aglow by the flames of that night, his face painted to match hers. She recalls his feverish face and their mad dash for freedom, his stump burned and raw.

She nods at him, and he bows low at the waist. In fact, many do as she steps by. A few young children and newer members peek up from the numbers, gazing fearlessly at her, but those who are familiar from years gone by meet her eyes and look upon her face before silently showing their respect. Brittle eel bone necklaces stand out against skin of all colors, and bird skulls stare at her with empty eye sockets from their perches as brooches or bangles. Scraps of fine kimono are braided together and tied around arms, adorned with teeth, and feathers, beads, bones, and colorful scraps of metal are braided into hair.

She walks through the makeshift residence without word, nodding her head to those who offer her the shows of respect, and she feels tired. She has spent years trying to get the Mumei to treat her like anybody else, and sometimes they do. Other times it seems that they have put her somewhere high above them, despite everything she says and does.

She take a moment to turn around at all of the people bent at the waist, staring at them. She wants to say something to do something to convince them that she is a person just like anybody else, but they have made her into something more. She's some sort of idea, a deity or philosophy, a specter spirit from the hard times. They have made her into a leader.

She feels the quiet urge to fight against it, and the hollow sadness in her heart, but she is separated from them by that distant Void, by the creeping strangeness of this place.

Still, she has never been one to simply settle for nothing, so she bows right back, bent at the waist, just as low as the rest of them. "You honor me," she says, her eyes facing the ground, "and so I honor you."

When she stands straight again, she swears she can see some people with wet eyes, and it itches underneath her skin.

She turns around and a blonde head of hair obstructs her path. "Hime," a familiar voice calls.

She can't help the small smile at the sound. "Hanako," she says. "You've grown well."

The woman stands, and her chest length blonde waves bounce with the movement, each bead and feather shifting subtly. Pale skin, only lightly tanned after years in the sun, stands clean from beneath a green, well-loved kimono style top and beige shorts, hanging loose around her legs.

"My tent is over there," Hanako says, pointing towards a comfortable, yert-like structure. "If you want to talk."

Ryuishi nods quietly, and is led away from the mob that has gathered around them. Their unsaid faith burns at her. It weighs down on her shoulder, a shroud of unspoken expectations. Another responsibility, another job, another struggle.

The years have been kind to Hanako, she thinks a day later, after the ceremonial celebration. The dirty, skeletal orphan from the gutters of Kiri is nowhere to be seen now. There isn't a thick, putrid layer of garbage coating her skin, and her sunken eyes and hollow cheeks have been chased away by proper nutrition. There is a glow to her peachy pale skin, and her once drab hair shimmers like gold. But more than that, there is confidence in her gait, pride pouring from her body language. Being chief of this tribe suits her well, and the slow but steady prosper of her people seems to shine in her eyes, even in the shade of the yert. A caged bird given room to fly free sits before her, and a glimmer of something like yearning sparks inside Ryuishi. Or is it envy?

"Hime?" the woman asks, searching the younger girl. "Why'd you come?"

Healing, hopes Hanako. *Please let her say healing.*

The young spirit that came from the fog to her when she was a child has grown so much physically. She is taller now, her hips widened and her breasts full, her lips pouty and plump. She has grown from the beautiful, kimono clad doll into something more. *Something darker*, her mind whispers.

Ninja, she curses silently. Ninja took her Hime. They caught the spirit meant to teach and guide, and they poisoned her divinity. The Academy and War broke her Hime, and it pushed her into a mold that shattered her wings and ruined her holy image. They tore her flesh and tried to consume her energy for themselves, and it hurts Hanako to think of what they must have done to her. To think of her sacred blood spilling from her body, to imagine the darkness they tainted her with.

"I have come to the only person I know I can trust," she says in her husky voice.

Hanako's heart leaps in her throat, and the breath leaves her lungs. Her teacher, her guide, trusts her. She turns to Hanako in times of need. She gave Hanako the place as tribe leader. She called on Hanako to assist her.

"There are children, unsafe in the lands of Ninja," her teacher states. "They will be persecuted, slaughtered for the sins of their parents."

Hanako nods in understanding. They are in need of intervention, and though there is darkness in her Lady's heart, there is compassion as well. Love for everything and everyone. It is what led her to teach, to look past appearances and see beneath trivial things like blood and history. The Rakki Ryu saw past one's skin and blood. She saw into the soul with her empty eyes.

"The Land of Iron is the only place they can flee to, but I-" she starts, and Hanako bristles on behalf of her Hime.

Ninja, she thinks again bitterly. They took her, and they made her like them. No ninja could reach past the borders.

"-I can't go there. The traders can, but they seek profit. You have ties to the people there, places to leave infants and know they will be safe."

"Why not with us?" the blonde asks, curious. Her teacher will not fault her for asking, she never has.

The dark-haired woman shakes her head. "If it is known, they will be hunted. *You* will be hunted, harder and crueller than ever before," she intones. "I do not trust the Elemental Nations to raise them, it is too volatile, too risky for them. They need a peaceful place, or at least one with structure and safety. No one can ever know of their departure."

"A secret, " she whispers, covetous. "For you an' me."

"And two more, the one who asked for my assistance, and one to help you. It can go no farther. Not the tribe, not my partner, nobody."

Hanako nods. A deed done for a deed's sake. No reward other than the spared lives of infants. She thinks it's fated, perhaps. Her Lady asks her now to do what she once did. To take children from danger, and give them a place to grow without persecution. She asks her to follow and understand. To make a choice.

"I trust you," she tells the dark-haired woman, reaching out to take her hand in her own. She may be smaller than her Lady, less muscled and scarred, but the spirit is always cold, always seeking warmth. Warmth Hanako is happy to provide.

The Rakki Ryuu does so much for her people. She feeds and waters them, gives them clothes and trinkets, gives them ways to travel the land unhindered. She teaches them how to survive, and lets them learn how to live again. Hanako isn't lying when she says she owes everything to her. She won't risk her tribe for the Rakki Ryuu, but her life is her own to give.

"I will do this," Hanako says, and the smile she receives is like the light of the stars on a dark night. It soothes her heart, because the girl she met, born from the mists, she is not lost. She still shines despite the darkness, and she lives well even though they trained her to kill. Her Hime is not lost, and she takes the lessons the shinobi taught her and she makes them her own.

I am worth something, Hanako thinks. And so is she.

Twenty-six days later, near a new schoolhouse in the Land of Rice, a crow drops from the sky and soars above the terraced farmland, it's black eyes seeking out the one marked by its summoner. It finds her standing on a peak, watching it approach her, arm raised as a perch. It scoffs to itself, because it is no hawk, but it lands there anyway. Why waste a perfectly fine perch?

"A stolen eye gives way for a new pair. Commence mission," it recites in a croaky voice. A pause for a second, then a deepening of its grim features. Sleek black feathers glint like oil in the sunlight, and narrow black eyes seem to sharpen with some loathsome feeling. It opens its sharp beak, and it's voice is hoarse with its ominous crow.

"They end in fire."

AN: SO! A few things in here I really want to make sure are understood- Ryuishi has been working in trade a lot to gain profits to change things, like, oh my god, but creating a village and running a movement are expensive. SUPER EXPENSIVE. I also want to say that even though she hopes it to be like the Meji Restoration (A kind of bloody time where Japan was industrialized and became a world power) it's probably not going to be like that. I will point out that the place where the mumei are staying right now is some unnamed country on the Narutowikia's World map that I gave background to. The Mumei themselves are being weird and creepy, but I hope not unbelievably so, because Pein did the same thing in Ame and

The Third Hokage is known as 'The God of Shinobi' and there are weird cult followings in tons of canon Naruto episodes. For most of the Mumei it's lipservice to say things anyway.

As for Ryuishi acknowledging that Orochimaru is twisted, let me say that there is no ally in this entire world who could suit her 'Morally upright' parameters. She also, as stated, has a hard time even guessing what morals are. She tore people's limbs off in the war, and she can be excessively cruel at times. These are canon. She tries to understand ethics and morals though, and she tries to not be a huge evil turd, which is the difference.

On a fun note, gonna start a counter I think. Something like 3-4 chapters until a heartwarming surprise. Could it be, a swordsman from the past?

I want to thank my Readers, my Favoriters, and my followers. We crossed a threshold. To my reviewers: OVER THREE THOUSAND HOLY SHIT BALLS. YOU GUYS ARE EVERYTHING, LOOK AT YOU GO. GET SOME REVIEWERS. LET ME LOVE YOU.

To my beta enbi- you are the constant force that keeps these works readable. I tried to edit my own things in SGU, and it was hard, and not well done. You are the brightest star in the sky.

Question: Can any of you relate to any of the characters in this series, or am I writing grossly unrealistic characters? OR What is the biggest challenge that Ryuishi faces according to you?

Meeting The Uchiha Massacre

I do not own Naruto. Or Clannad's ending song, 'Dango Daikazoku'

There is a pounding in Ryuishi's blood that has been absent for a long, *long* time. It fills her ears, lulling her excess thoughts away into the back of her head, pulling her focus to a sharp, efficient point. Her heart pulses with a steady surety inside her chest, rhythmic and fixed. Her breath comes in a set pattern, filling her lungs with the night air.

Seven in, hold four, seven out.

Repeat.

She has never quite forgotten this feeling. That being said, memory doesn't do it justice. There is something about creeping through the darkness like a nightmare come to life that is satisfying to her. That monster inside her head, that primordial instinct, it wears her skin and it prowls across the landscape towards her destination with a single-minded focus she hasn't felt since the Third Shinobi War. No complications, no fuss, just the goal. Just the mission.

Hyperfocus, that's what she'll call it later. For somebody like her, who struggles to reign in all her thoughts, it's a miraculous feeling. It's so solid, so sure, when her life so rarely is.

She moves, flitting between hiding spots, sleeker than she has ever been. Her body is a tool, finely honed from infiltration and years of a Sannin's tutelage, and the leaves barely whisper in her wake. The dust beneath her feet is not disturbed, and water does not ripple. Ryuishi is a fluid shadow, the ghost in the corner of your eye at night, the flicker of something through the woods.

This is one of the few times she absolutely *cannot* afford to fuck up.

It's game over if she's noticed at the massacre by anyone other than Itachi. Konoha could easily use her as a scapegoat, or even cast her under suspicion. Diplomatic actions would fall through, and she would become enemy number one in their eyes. Not only that, but the Madara imposter will be there as well, and if he thinks that Itachi is betraying him, or that there is a third party involved, they both die. If she leaves a trail, then the infants die.

The pressure is immense, but she doesn't have it in her to be cowed by it right now. There is only the movement of her body and the nameless predator boiling in her blood. There is only the focus, guiding her and pulling her.

She eats up ground, racing towards Konoha as fast as she can go. Itachi may not have time to wait, and she will not make him. She always said to give the signal 'after he had grown new eyes'. If he has, then Shisui has failed and she has maybe, *maybe* a week period to fuck around with before Madara shows up. She's guessing because the anime and manga were never clear about it, but it fits.

She makes record time, nonstop travel at an accelerated pace to get from the border of Rice to Konoha, in the very heart of Fire. Still not as fast as some, but good God is it fucking quick for her.

The summon follows her, or rather, she allows it to. She even helps it conserve chakra, letting it perch on her shoulder whenever the animal feels the need. The moment she makes it before the security patrols, it flies off to find its contractor, its wings dark against the setting sun.

Farther out than usual, she prepares herself for infiltration, smothering her chakra and dampening it down so much she can feel the ache inside her coils-a stuffed, nauseous feeling. She wraps up her hair tight with a pin and stretches out, pulling her Gills from her bag. Underneath them, the scratched out headband she wore so long ago glimmers like a stark reminder. The thick, jagged gash that cuts through the four lines is like an omen. As she is now, so he will soon become.

The cicadas cry out, a warbling trill as sunset comes close. She takes a breath, settling herself, savouring this present moment. The clarity of her purpose, the focus on her goal, and the drive she has.

With steady hands, she slides the breathing apparatus in her mouth. The familiar weight pulls on her jaw, and the shape fits over her teeth. She breathes a quick test breath, and the near-silent hiss assures her that it is working, as does the stale, dry air that fills her lungs.

She slides into the river, far away from watching eyes and wary guards, and it surrounds her without a single ripple over its surface. Gravity fails, and she floats for a second, orienting herself, her eyes scanning over the depths, her body adjusting to the temperature. Time seems to dilate, and she can hear the warbling cry of the cicadas fade as she swims deeper. She undulates, working her way through the water, hidden from eyes above and below.

Five children, all under the age of three. The youngest at 7 months, then 9 months, 13 months, then 18 months. The oldest is two and a month. That's it, that's all she can do.

He has the sedatives for them, procured from his travels. She has the food, bottles, blankets, diapers and wipes. Not to mention a small, child-friendly pharmacy in her bag. She procured the devices to hold them and float them down; baskets made to look like river reeds and balanced to not capsize or flip, lined with cushions as soft as a rabbit's fur.

Ryuishi has gone over this again and again, down to the genjutsu they will use to hide their cargo until they make it out of the country. Failsafes, escape plans, meeting points, code words, and attack strategies. They went over it until they could recite it by memory.

In a way, she is still surprised he chose to use fire, though. He had spoken at length about not wanting to damage what would remain of his clan. He called them reminders, relics to be. Ryuishi knows that no matter his want, the easiest way to hide their trail would be to

destroy evidence. Not only that, but stolen Sharingan no longer remain a problem if he cremated the whole district.

She guesses she has Danzo to thank for the change. He already stole an eye, what was to stop others from desecrating the remains of his family? All she knows is that she has to traverse the length of the river and wait for him. Whether it is hours or days, she has to remain hidden until he says so.

She checks the flotation baskets in the forest clearings, all prepped and ready for their cargo, hidden among the river reeds and tree roots. She settles beneath the surface. It isn't very deep in this area, no more than six feet, but the long, tangled roots of the trees give her shelter to hide in. She tangles her body in their network, chasing off a turtle and a few perch in her effort to claim the spot as her own.

She waits.

Ryuishi doesn't really keep track of time. It's already hard for her to do so on a regular basis, but here, wrapped in the embrace of wood and water, it's almost impossible. Her heartbeat slows, and her eyes droop. It's an almost trance-like meditative state, where all the fading light shimmers and fades, and all she knows is the hold of water and shadow, like a babe in the womb.

She isn't a sensor type, so she can't say what the others are doing, but she can know that as the evening approaches and the night begins to fall, she feels a stirring in her soul. It's a resonance of sorts, she supposes. The Void writhes, and she suppresses a shiver as the abyss seems to open up, greeting the newly dead. Numbness oozes over her, empty and hollow, and it seems terrifying and sentimental. She feels like she's riding the tide, sweeping across the battlefields, cold and desperate and empty inside. It's like feeling Squad Eleven dying all over again. Or the front lines.

She waits for what seems like forever, staring at nothingness and the growing dark, submerged and desensitized. She is awash with memories of nothingness and the darkness between stars, while a

thirteen-year-old boy-a child, he's just a child-carries out the political assassination of his own family.

Then darkness sweeps across the river in earnest, and silver light, so faint and far away, trickles through the liquid. She feels faint vibrations, so very soft against her skin, and she mechanically looks toward the surface. A toe dips in, sending ripples across the top of the water.

One tap, then a pause. Then three, then five.

Ryuishi unwinds from her hiding place and rises up slowly, moving as the river does, at a slow, languid pace. She gathers the carriers and slides them over from below, gently moving them with her hands. The top of her head breaks the surface, her eyes and nose peeking out, along with the tips of her ears.

It says something about her life that the stink of burning flesh and the distant orange glow that fills her eyes sends a wave of nostalgia over her. She remembers the Fall of Kirigakure and the number of Katon from the war very, very well in that moment.

A silhouette towers over her, and it too reminds her of days gone by. Itachi could be carved from stone with the lack of expression and body language he has in that moment. So young, and so very worn. His clothes are stained with flecks of red, and his eyes are puffy around the edges from crying.

She mourns for him, for his family, for the children forced to grow too fast because of the darkness that surrounds them.

Somehow, he has managed to carry three infants and two toddlers here, all with heads supported. Their limp frames droop, and the sedatives are clearly working. The slow, deep breaths are a clear giveaway.

He settles one inside the carrier, and Ryuishi helps him as they secure the others, rising for a moment to scan their surroundings,

speaking in a quiet hiss around her gills.

"Your partner won't be tracking us, correct?"

Itachi, heartbroken and tired, does not even wonder how she knows anymore. Nothing matters now. Maybe she really is a Ningyo, with visions of the future. Madara lives, so why can't other legends live as well?

"Taking time to explore my options was in the terms agreed," he answers, emotionless.

She nods, and the hair floating around her shifts with the movement. "We have a lot of ground to cover," she states, looking at his weary, empty expression. Her gaze softens just the smallest amounts, and she reaches out to wipe at a dried tear track as he sets the last infant down. "I know it means nothing from me," she whispers, "but for what it's worth, you're a good person, Itachi."

He stares at her with nothing in his eyes for a moment, and then he silently touches the wet hand against his face and peels it away. He thinks of his parents-their last words, and their broken bodies. He thinks of his uncle's blood on his shins, and his cousin's trachea poking out through the soft flesh of his neck. The old woman across from the bakery, who had not fought once, and the elder who had tried to before he was ensnared by genjutsu and razor wire. He thinks of how they felt, and the choice he made. Peace over war, the loss of some over the loss of many.

He thinks of Sasuke's wide, agonized eyes and the crackling of flames. Their greatest pride, turned against them.

" I don't have time to waste on you," he had told his brother. " There are too many things to be done. "

And it was true. There had been. Too many infants to collect, and not enough time to say goodbye. He had wanted to goad his sibling, to

push him into hating his older brother. He wanted his brother to seek him out, to avenge their clan, to have a purpose.

There had been no time, and no chakra to waste with the journey ahead. Madara was there, and so was a dangerous missing-nin, and Sasuke was his weak spot, they both knew it. Perhaps he would hate him enough already without cruel words and genjutsu, seeing him stand over the corpses of their parents.

Itachi is thirteen, and he was pushed between two immovable forces his whole life. He was used and manipulated, and so he did what he had been taught: he turned the situation to work the best it could, and he did what was needed.

For peace.

(*For Sasuke .*)

"Move out," he orders, and it chafes at her a bit. She can't really blame him, though. The kid just straight up killed his family. Fucks a person up.

She slips back beneath the surface of the stream, and the noise cuts out once more. She feels the area around them fizzle for a moment, like some sort of slick oil filled with bees. A genjutsu settles over the duo and charges, and he sets the pace, watching from above and monitoring the status of the children while she matches them all from below. Her hands glide out and she nudges them onwards at a faster rate, urging them on and keeping them stable. Everytime she shows she can manage his pace, he moves faster, and she works to keep up until they reach the grate in the wall. Usually she would dive under, but infants cannot be submerged.

Above water, the fence hangs about a foot above the surface of the liquid before connecting with the wall. Below it goes almost completely to the bottom, and it spans the width of the river. Getting through it without leaving a trail had bothered her for some time, until Itachi had helpfully pointed out that the grate had fish doors. That's

right, fish doors. Openings for the larger fish to pass through, only half-submerged.

Apparently, if you are a tiny baby, or Uchiha Itachi, you can fit through them. Ryuishi might, if she uses the flexibility she worked for, but her hips usually got in the way. Which just meant she swam under and received the infants on the other side, waiting while Itachi struggled in the most graceful fashion she had ever seen. Truly, a prodigy.

In the end, she winds up swimming over, holding the carriers with her chakra covered feet. It makes swimming a bit harder, but it's worth it when she grips Itachi by the hands.

"Let the water take you," she whispers. He blanks again, and for a moment he stiffens, but time is racing. "Work with the current, it will make us go faster with less energy."

He slowly, slowly lets himself go limp, and she pulls him free of the fish door and the water gushes around him. His clothes are soaked, but it was to be expected.

Now it is her turn, and she guides him over to the carriers while she dips into her smothered chakra and forms seals. It's harder to do when suppressing one's signature, but not impossible. It simply requires her to utilize every last bit of control and weave the jutsu with the optimum level of chakra without waste. No pressure or anything, she thinks to herself sarcastically.

Thirty seconds later, the water around her churns, and six identical faces emerge beside her. Without a glance, four break off from the group, heading towards opposite sides of the shore and the remaining two rush themselves towards the upcoming fork in the river, laying false trails. The pace picks up, and this time, she leads from below. She strings the cradles together and they work their pace back up again, careful of chakra trails and scent markers.

They aren't fucking around now. They have twelve hours before the sedative begins to wear off, and ideally, they need to be halfway across the country at that point. Traveling with the last remnants of a recently massacred and much feared clan is going to hard, and danger will be around every corner. Not even taking into the fact that she has to somehow work out how to treat a traumatized, violently shaken prodigy who just was coerced into killing his whole family, there are five fucking babies here. *Babies.*

Ryuishi briefly wonders if she should have looked at the human aspect of this a little more.

The duo reaches the stopping point of the river, and it is here that Ryuishi shows her use once more, surfacing silently in the dark night, mile and miles away from Konoha.

Carrying the children is another logistics nightmare. The normal traveling methods ninja utilize are a little too... well, movement oriented. Ryuishi can't imagine jumping, flipping and diving with infants in her arms. Not only would it be hard for her, but there would be the constant danger towards the children. One does not shake babies.

The solution actually comes from her experience with the babies she was around in her past life. It had come to her when she was cleaning out her pack, and she was faced with a multitude of colorful fabrics she used as sarongs. Sarongs, which were the duct tape of clothes. They could be skirts, tops, dresses, and most importantly, they could be baby carriers. Recalling how to secure the weight had involved experimentation with watermelons and knots, but eventually it slowly came back.

When she removes five dark blue swaths of cloth from her bag, the worn, wet teenager looks stone-faced as usual, but she can almost feel the judgmental aura rolling off of him. It slowly melts into understanding, however, when she walks him through the steps.

"This is the best way to move them and maintain maneuverability and speed," she offers as she ties it firmly near his shoulders. It looks awkward. Not because of positioning, but because it's Itachi, and Itachi with two babies cradled near his chest is weird.

He nods and goes to assist her, pulling the nine month old free from the carrier and giving him over for her to hold. Ryuishi takes the heavily sleeping form with a small amount of trepidation, and as she wraps it in the cloth, she becomes aware of just how very tiny the child is.

Just a baby, she thinks.

It's... soft. Soft, and warm, and oh-so-fragile. Its limbs are like jello, squishy and malleable, and its skin is unblemished by any marks. It feels so breakable in her hands, its silky pale skin sliding smoothly over her callused hands. It can't be more than twenty five pounds.

She feels something inside her heart ache with yearning. It's paler than her family ever was, but its hair is dark like hers, and she knows its eyes will be the same coal color of her own. It reminds her of the first time she cared for a baby, and it breaks her heart. Because this child, this little tiny girl, it reminds her of the sister she once had.

Itachi helps her swaddle it close to her chest, bound safely near her ribs. She can feel its weight, so light compared to her usual burdens. The eighteen month old joins it, wrapped to hang on the opposite side.

The two of them are a warm press against her breasts, and she wonders. If she had stayed in her old world, if she had lived, could she have had something like this? Would she have borne a child, or adopted one? The age would have been right, and there was so much potential-

"You have dealt with infants before," Itachi says lowly, watching her. The way her hands soothe over their sleeping forms and the way she carries their weight are clear signs of experience. The softness

in her expression and the quiet, automatic protectiveness in her eyes are also telling. His mother looked at Sasuke like-

He breathes in and smoothly shifts the memories of her blood running over his blade out of his mind, focusing himself, muffling the emptiness and intense sorrow he feels. He has to keep going, he can't stop, can't mourn or regret. What's done is done, and it doesn't matter if he feels dead and cold inside, if he feels like his entire being is weeping. He can't go back.

"I told you once I had a family," she answers honestly, quiet and reverent as she shifts the two year old into her arms, carefully settling it on her hip, head resting on her shoulder. It looks awkward with the two children she already carries, but not unnatural.

"Not anymore," he says, and it's not a question.

"Always," she corrects, and it surprises him just the smallest amount. It was implied that they were not in this world any longer.

"Family means you never forget them. Family is forever," she says, and it hurts him, physically pains him to hear it. She has been a missing-nin for seven years, and probably lost them before she defected. Even after all this time, she still mourns. He hurts more than can be imagined, and apparently, that pain will never go away.

He thinks of the lingering sadness he saw when she was recovering from her illness in Hatake Kakashi's apartment. He thinks that now he understands the raw, ruined expression that crossed her face when she spoke of her past.

She turns to him, sinking the last carrier far below, and she meets his blank face, and it seems to him that perhaps, this scarred woman leads a life that parallels his own. Shinobi from a young age, family gone, marked as traitors to their village, and clinging to the ones they love while betraying them.

"It will always haunt you," she tells him, and there is something in her gaze there, empathy and understanding. "Their smiling faces, their laughs, their tears, everything. The blood doesn't leave your hands, and the guilt eats away. Every day becomes a fight to not drown in it all."

Hopelessness gnaws at him, mixing with the hollow stone his heart has become.

"I'm not really good at coping, and I understand that it just all sounds like words right now. The only thing I have ever learned how to do is keep trying," she tells him. Then she turns, heading north. "One step at a time. I wake up, and I remember how to breathe. I get up, and I walk. One step at a time," she whispers. Her back seems distant, but the folds of the slings carrying the children make it closer, more human. The backpack and the child on her hip, they ground her.

"Why?" he asks, because it seems so hard, so pointless. It's over, and everything he knows is gone. He has taken everything from himself, for the sake of a village he can no longer live in and a peace he will not have.

"The only other option is death," she says honestly. "And really, I'll take the hope that something changes over the endless abyss any day. The thought that maybe, one day, that warm memory of a feeling won't just be a memory. The prayer that I can do better for someone else, that I can make it so that they don't have to do it alone. I can try and make it so kids like these have a better chance than I had."

He moves, walking after her. He takes solace in her husky voice, holding onto the distraction that it is. He is hollow, and he is broken, but so is she, and she is still alive. Still trying. It's so tiny, so infinitesimally small, but there is hope. The children will live. Sasuke will grow.

He isn't alone tonight.

He does not walk this dark path alone.

Ryuishi decides that she really, really didn't think this plan through.

It's not that it isn't working, or that a sudden unseen surprise has ruined everything. No, it isn't that at all. It's just that now that her focus has drifted and the immediate danger has passed, she realizes exactly what she signed up for.

Itachi is a broken mess of a person with an eerily perfect blank face, and seriously, that expressionless mask he has is creepier the longer she hangs around. She can practically feel the agony just beneath the surface in him, and she wants to do something, anything at all to help. Unfortunately, she has her hands full, figuratively and literally. Their time is up, and the sedatives wore off almost a day and a half ago. She told Itachi to rest while she took care of things, and now she almost regrets it.

(Almost. That kid needs every scrap of compassion she can give.)

The two year old keeps doing this weird half-walk, half bear-crawl thing in the clearing they've found, and he keeps babbling. He's calling for his 'tou-san', which is heartbreaking. The eighteen month old is doing his damndest to follow him around on all fours, wobbly as he shuffles in the grass.

"Don't let him crawl off!" she hisses at her clone, who has just kept the thirteen month old from falling down. It settles the weeping child next to Ryuishi, who hooks her foot around the front of it and drags it back. Her hands are occupied by two bottles, held in place for the nine month old and seven month old.

She has no idea how in the fuck she would have done this is she didn't have Water Clones. As it stands, she's tempted to sedate them all anyway, because even though they are nearly out of Fire Country, they are still in danger of being found and five kids are *loud* .

"Shhhh," she hums to the thirteen month old, who has begun bawling in honest. Itachi needs all the sleep he can get, and she let him take first watch because she hadn't slept in so long.

"-WAAaaaaaAAaah-" it continues, and Ryuishi suddenly wonders how her own mother and father raised so many children. Her parents were obviously saints.

"Hey now, don't be like that," she chides, and the child fists its weak, fat little hands in her shirt and smears snot across it. Wonderful.

"You ate, were bathed and changed out of those give-away outfits, and now you can play. What do you want, huh?"

"-wAAaaaaaaaahhh-" it wails, and Ryuishi takes a deep breath as the nine-month-old girl blinks her big black eyes and makes a face around the bottle like she's going to start crying too.

" *Dango, dango, dango, dango, dango, dango, daikazoku,*" she croons desperately, thinking of one of the very, very few Japanese children's songs she knows. It's not even a kids' song, for fuck's sake, it's an anime theme song. But it's the closest thing she can think of, and desperate times call for desperate measures.

And indeed, luck smiles upon her, because the two year old stops struggling in her clone's arms at the first note, whipping his head around at the mention of dango.

She smiles as the toddler whipping its face on her boob relents for a single second, its whimpering fading a bit. " *Dango, dango, dango, dango, dango, dango, daikazoku,*" she repeats in the same tone.

"Day-go," singsongs the two year old, transfixed. He is a pudgy thing, they all are. Where the hell do kids get all the floppy bits and pieces from? She knows biology, and basic child rearing, but good Lord, they're all so soft and squishy. Her moe-loving heart can't take this kind of cute bullshit, not when she knows that they all became orphans not two days ago.

" *Yancha na Yaki dango, yasashii an dango*," she sings, enrapturing her very young audience. That's good, she needs them still for a bit when she burps the babies. Though why a song about a big family made of sticky sweet dumplings resulting from various cooking methods captures their interests, she will never know. But if they want to hear about naughty fried dango or red bean dango, she'll sing her heart out.

" *Sukoshi yumemi gachi na Tsukimi dango*," she continues, nodding towards the towel in her bag, hoping her clone will get the message. She doesn't want baby vomit on her shirt, dammit.

The copy of her somehow figures it out and rushes around with the two year old on its hip. Call her vain, but if her clone looks exactly as she does in this moment, then she makes kickin' ass and babysitting look damn good.

The last drops drain from the bottles, and she sets them aside as her water clone drapes a towel around her shoulders and sets the two year old on the grass to listen and mumble along. The thirteen month old is too busy chewing on the edge of her shirt to really make a fuss, and the eighteen month old is still bobbing and crawling in a circle around them.

Her song continues softly as she burps the nine-month-old girl, and her clone mimics her with the older infant. Lunch is finished, and everyone is clean and fed. By dinner, they will be fussy and screaming again, especially the teething girl in her arms.

Then when they begin to drop, she and Itachi will haul them even farther north. She wishes she could call them by name, but only Itachi knows, and he isn't telling. Apparently, 'they will receive new ones when they are with their new families' and 'their names died with the Uchiha.'

She hopes Hanako bought a wagon to haul these brats around in. It's cold in Iron, even in late summer, and slings won't cut it. Not only that, but Hanako is one woman. She can't use clones.

Ryuishi is fairly certain that Hanako can keep a secret and recruit some helpers at the same time, though. Her old gang from the alley should be able to help, at least. They trust her enough to follow her without knowing every piece of information.

The nine-month-old girl lets out a wet burp and spits up just the smallest amount onto the towel. Ryuishi keeps up her song as she wipes away the sick from her pudgy little face, listening to the two oldest spawn try and sing with her in a totally off-key way. The Uchiha do have a weakness, it turns out. It's their horrible tone deafness. Even for children the singing is bad, more like the yowling of cats fighting in an alleyway than any sort of melody.

She attempts not to cringe as her side becomes progressively wetter. How can a child produce so much drool? Where is it getting all of its hydration? She could do a fucking Suito technique with the amount of saliva leaking out of its mouth hole.

"Dai-go dai kazzu-koo!" warbles the two year old as they reach the chorus, and the seven month old with her clone breaks off into that awful, choppy baby crying.

She is so glad they decided to play on the other side of the clearing. Itachi truly must need his rest if this shit isn't waking him up. His deep slumber is definitely because he's exhausted, and not at all because Ryuishi maybe mixed a little bit of the baby sedative into his bowl of stew last night. She would never do that, especially not to a young man who was suffering from insomnia and ineffable amounts of stress and guilt. No way would she give him something for dreamless sleep.

She snorts to herself, and the kids in front of her copy that too. Parrots, all of them. "But super cute parrots, aren't you?" she sings at them with a grin, mussing up the drooly thirteen month old's hair. It's soft, like corn silk.

She doesn't worry too much about the prodigy, aside from his mental state and future health problems. He's a genius in every sense of the

term, and he knew that something was off with his senses last night. No way he doesn't know about the Chloral Hydrate. It has a fucking taste for Shiva's sake. He knew it when he met her eyes as he bedded down that she had gotten him, and he didn't even look upset. He didn't look like anything, because Uchiha Itachi is yet again creepily blank faced.

Above them, in the rocky forest and odd mountainous structures of Earth Country, brownish doves sing, drawing her from her thoughts. Ryuishi grins, standing with the nine month old in her arms. The baby's arms wave and it gurgles at her, reaching for her bangs. The child that was drooling on her side looks up at her like it can't believe for a single damn moment she had the audacity to move.

"I thought you kids scared off the game!" she whispers excitedly, and the toddlers and infants burble and laugh. Well, the one with her clone is crying, but it's a baby, it always cries, so whatever. "Dove for dinner! Or, well, dove for dinner for me and Itachi if I can catch them with a baby in my arms," she amends, looking at them. "You guys get milk and mashed fruit and vegetable shit regardless. And meat, you know, for you toddlers."

"Day-go," the boy tells her serious, and the eighteen month old gives her a solid, "Ugeragh."

"Yes," she answers back, nodding her head. She doesn't know what they want but she can play along.

"Suko-zhi," he says, and she nods harder, her eyes scanning the scraggly trees, sparse grass, and boulders.

"As soon as I can young sir," she intones seriously, and he beams at her, which is nice. At least he's stopped calling for his parents. That shit was depressing to watch. Actually, if she thinks about it, this whole situation is very depressing.

... Which is why she is adamantly not thinking about it too hard. She's the adult here, somebody has to hold this shit together. She

might not do a great job but dammit, she is trying.

That's all she can do.

The chilly winds of the the far north bite through the cloak he wears, and he hunches protectively over the infants in his care. It is only late summer, and already the cold has begun to set into the air here.

In front of him, blocking the worst of the wind, Watanabe stands like sculpture. Her arms wrap snugly around the bundled children, their faces hidden against her skin. Even the ever-rambunctious two year old grasps tightly onto her solid form, his small arms clinging to her scarred neck, his body hidden under her loose hair.

"How far?" he asks. Two weeks of traveling with her has been an experience unlike any other. The missing-nin certainly knows how to keep pace, and more than that, she knows how to throw off any trails. Two weeks of journeying, and she has laid more false trails and given more dead ends than he ever thought possible.

She cared for the children with tender hands and an open heart. She cooked every meal and made every bed at night, singing away their tears and smothering their discomfort with affection. Even he was not left untouched by her gestures, her grand stories woven from nothing and her understanding as he mourned.

Itachi has come to understand that Kirigakure made her into a capable kunoichi with a fearsome reputation, but Watanabe Ryuishi herself was created for family.

Determined, melodic song echoes through the landscape, bouncing off of slate grey stones, and she ignores his question. It's louder than he thinks is necessary, and it gives away their position, which sets him on edge. He can comprehend this method of communication, but it is still strange to him.

Itachi listens for the answering call while he wonders about the voyage he has embarked upon. Every step he has taken, she has been there with a helping hand. When he numbed himself and shut his emotions away, she traveled beside him and spoke of nothing at all, filling the nights with her voice. When he watched the survivors of his massacre, and guilt weighed down on him so heavy he could choke on it, she led the little ones away, giving him time to grieve with a blank face and heavy heart. When he woke from his sleep, eyes spinning red and hands covered with blood, she whispered to him, called his name, told him that it would be okay. She edged closer and brought him back with cold hands and curse words.

She cut throats and started uprisings, and her body count grew every day. She disrupted the peace for her own gain, and she had an abrasive, off-putting personality.

And yet she played with the children as if she had already raised her own, and she sacrificed everything for the people she chose to care about.

For every thought he had of Sasuke, she thought of her own. For every dream he had of his brother, she dreamt of her team.

It isn't just desperation that drives them, he thinks as her husky voice croons over another gust, her hair whipping around them, their cloaks snapping. It is love, and hope, and the weight of their own sins. They walk the path of darkness willingly, but they are not lost to it. They find places to hide their truths where no one can ever find them, and their secrets end when they do.

She breathes in and continues her strange, wordless song. Her feet continue, sturdy and sure, and he follows, sheltered by her back. Then, like a dog, she cocks her head to the side, and he hears it. High and sharp, a whistle floats down from a ravine ahead.

"Now, Itachi," she croaks, her voice even more raw than usual, worn down from constant use. He nods and echoes the whistle as best he can, startling one of the babies near his chest. It gurgles and whines

for a moment, but it ceases to matter. So close to the border of Iron, so close to their new life, it is alright if they cry now.

"Follow the sound," she orders, and a smile overtakes her face, her cheeks red from the wind. A moment is all it takes her, and she leaps with chakra laden feet, clutching tight to the children. He watches, and for a moment, with her cloak and long hair billowing around her, she looks like the goddess Izanami, a forsaken mother of life and death, descending from the heavens.

He clears his head and takes after her. It was a silly thought, brought on by fatigue and emotional turmoil. He isn't usually this sentimental. Watanabe is simply holding up her end of the bargain while making sure he is well enough to hold up his own when the time comes.

The wagon comes into view, and some sort of nervousness leaves him at the sight of a duo of obviously civilian traders. They stand up, and the oxen pulling them-thick furred and fat, fit for the temperature-groan as they come to a stop. Even the Sharingan confirms it. Their coils are untrained and unused, and the wagon is full of merchandise, a spot cleared in the back for the infants.

"What was the first thing I ever taught you?" asks Ryuishi, almost immediately.

"Eels," chimes the male with drab brown hair. He's around the same age as the blond woman next to him. They sit folded over one another, like old friends, huddled together for warmth and comfort. There is something like compassion in their eyes when they look at him.

"What did you give me before the war?" chimes the woman with feathers and beads in her hair.

"The tribe," she snaps back, and then Itachi is being pulled around the back where they are opening the covered wagon. Inside are various silks and fabrics, child care supplies, and curiously enough, steel bars.

He slides his eyes over to the missing-nin. The metal trade is an important and highly isolated industry. It makes sense that she would have her hands in it if she is trading with the samurai. Even they need metal to forge their blades.

She comes beside him, and her now familiar grasp settles on his shoulder as she hefts the weight of the children gently into their place in the wagon. "You made it, kid," she whispers. "This is their second chance at life. Hanako has contact with tradesmen and even a few nobles across the border. She's already got places for them."

He says nothing as he eyes the trio ahead, the ones who are so obviously devoted to the woman who has traveled so long with him. When they look at her, it is with utter trust and awe. It is the look a genin sends their jounin-sensei after their first bad encounter.

"Safe," he whispers finally, because it sounds absurd. He feels numb and cold inside, like he never quite thought they would make it this far, as if this was all a dream. In front of him, his second and third cousins squirm in their nests, dark eyes shining bright. He stares at their forms, committing each one to memory. From their pudgy toes to their silky black hair, he memorizes them.

Not even Watanabe will be able to retrieve them, not without him spilling every secret he has on her. Not without extreme retribution. Even Madara would have trouble crossing over to the land of samurai, where chakra is limited and controlled and every border is patrolled in tightly-knit, closed patterns.

"Safe," she echoes, gently folding the blankets around the nine month old. She leans in, and the child gurgles happily.

Ryuishi is going to miss her, even though it has only been a couple of weeks. Like a reverse imprint or something, she already yearns for the weight of the sling around her back and the warm, soft bundle of baby and drool in her arms. Despite the diapers filled with urine and feces, and despite the vomit and the constant crying, Ryuishi liked taking care of the children, and especially this little girl.

With a deep breath, she draws away, and she turns to Itachi, who watches her with empty eyes. She shuts off her stupid, bleeding heart and reminds herself that her body is only eighteen, and she is in no state to raise a child. She probably would make a terrible fucking mother.

"You did good," she tells him, because he needs it. Because he *is* good, and he needs to be constantly uplifted before he's thrown into the shit once more and life crumbles beneath him. He needed this time to mourn, to cry silently when he thought she was asleep. He needs to know he can do good just as well as he can destroy.

He shakes his head and they toil for a few more hours, working to get the wagon ready and settle everyone back. She has no doubt Itachi is inspecting every inch of the carrier and her chosen caretakers, but she doesn't mind, and they don't either.

Together, the two of them watch in silence as the wagon full of precious cargo sets off, and it gnaws at her in ways it shouldn't. They did good work, they really did, but what is good work in this place? Standing by as an organized nation lets a thirteen-year-old boy massacre his family for the sake of peace? Is it good or bad that she stood by as so many died? What kind of person is she, to keep such a large secret, one that could change everything?

She doesn't know.

"I will join the group, and I will watch over Hoshigaki Kisame," Itachi says, breaking the silence.

She shakes her thoughts away, staring up at the overcast skies. The sun barely peeks through the soft, puffy grey clouds. "Itachi," she says slowly, "If..."

He watches the wagon grow smaller and smaller, and she tries to think of anything she hasn't already said, any advice she hasn't already given.

"If there comes a time when you are sick or confused or in need," she states. "If you just want to run, or talk, you can come to me."

The offer is a lifelong one, but they both are clever, and they know that. It doesn't need to be spoken. He's thirteen and he's lost his whole world, and she knows how that is. She knows it like the scar on her ribs, or the mark winding down her back and thigh.

She knows she's not the best, and she knows that he knows that as well. There's no hiding it, but she can do what she has always done.

She can fucking try.

He breathes in, and for the first and most likely only time in her life, Ryuishi is gifted with the rare treasure of Uchiha Itachi's gentle, genuine smile. It simultaneously makes her want to return one and cry, because it is so heartrendingly warm and sad.

"Watanabe Ryuishi," he says. "You are a strange person."

She blinks, but he's already turning around, splitting away from her so quickly it leaves her a bit stunned. She thinks she might have been hallucinating or something, because there was definitely something after that. Something that sounded suspiciously like, "Thank you."

AN: So we have the very emotional chapter that includes the Uchiha Massacre. I hope some of you caught some of the smaller changes already in there, but trust me when I say that there are more changes than the ones here. Sasuke in particular, but Konoha as well. Itachi is a very hard character to write. Please remember that he is thirteen, making Ryuishi older as well. I think I wrote that in here? But remember she doesn't really celebrate her birthdays much, because she has no one to celebrate them with. So she probably was like 'oh, I'm _ now. Kewl.' AGES GET SORTED OUT SOON OR WHATEVER.

I really hope I captured young Itachi well, and didn't just make him some sort of weirdo with Ryuishi. I just feel like, even as a genius 13yo, having somebody who was an adult there would be a load off his mind. Having someone to share the secret with, to remind him that he is better than what he is making himself out to be, and a physical representation that even though it feels like life is over, it can go on, would be really helpful. It also probably helps that Itachi could probs kill her if he felt like it.

LOOK AT ALL THESE BABIES AND FEELS IN THIS CHAPTER.

Update on swordman chapter. It's the one right after the next one, I'm pretty sure. We get to see wtf was up with Kiri, and also, more feels.

I would like to thank my lurkers, my followers, and my favoriters. I want to take my reviewers by the hand and lead them to a table and feed them a good home cooked meal made with aLL THE LOVE I HAVE FOR YOU GUYS. SERIOUSLY. MY HEART HAS A BONER FOR ALL MY REVIEWERS. YOU KEEP ME WRITING. I READ EVERY ONE.

Il also would like to thank Enbi, my beta, who leads her betanavy and who really helped me out with this chapter. She also got it to me early, so, you know, all the love for her. She did this, go thank her.

Question: How do you think the first meeting between Itachi and Kisame will go now? OR What if Ryuishi was born in Konoha around Kakashi's age?

Meeting the Changes

I do not own Naruto.

Watanabe Ryuishi knows a lot of things.

She knows mundane things, like how to set tiles in a floor, spaced evenly apart, and how to smooth grout over the surface. She knows how the cold ocean feels on a hot and muggy summer day, refreshing and clean. She knows that if she skips her medicine she'll pay for it sometime later, even if it makes her feel dizzy sometimes.

Some things she knows are darker in nature, like how it feels to take a life, or the feeling of bones breaking beneath her fists and flesh giving under her blades. She knows the same loving embrace of water that can cradle her to sleep can steal the last breath from someone's lungs.

She's been around a while now, living two lives and all that. She's experienced the bitter, agonizing taste of loss like a constant bad taste lingering in the back of her mouth. She is familiar with the rising swell of love inside her chest, growing in size and filling up her body like the best kind of alcohol. She has tasted hope, again and again, even after she has thought she would never taste it again.

She likes to think she's passably clever and mildly intelligent. She's always been good at problem solving and creative thinking.

There's lots of things she can do, and just as many things she can't.

Ryuishi can't track worth a damn, or even attempt to do anything like fūinjutsu. She can't draw very well, and she's no good at awkward social situations. Sometimes she forgets joy exists, and her personality fractures into a million separate pieces when pushed too far. She has limits, and she's not great at minding them, pushing

herself too hard and too fast. She's not entirely stable, and she'll probably never be a Kage-level fighter. She's a liar, she cheats at Uno, she has a horrid sense of humor, electrical work confuses her, and she is capable of turning her head the other way to miss an inconvenient truth.

Watanabe Ryuishi isn't dumb. She knows a lot of things.

So when Uchiha Itachi disappears like a fucking ghost, bursting into *crows* of all the damn things, she knows that she has done all she can for him and his. She knows that this is where their paths diverge once more, and she accepts it as best she can. She tries not to miss the gurgling of infants, the screaming laughter of very small children, half-formed words in tiny voices, dirty hands desperate to be held, or giggles like bubbles on the wind.

She attempts to shove the feelings of guilt away, because Itachi is only thirteen, and he should have never had to make this decision. Thirteen year olds should be in middle school, or pushing freshman year. Their biggest worries should be pimples and nonsensical drama, or shitty lunches at school. They should be just starting to discover their own paths and dealing with the struggle of hormones. No thirteen year old should be embroiled in politics to the point where they must choose between their family and country. At no point in time should they ever feel the wash of their mother's blood against their skin, or hear their father's gurgling last breaths.

More than that, she tells herself that despite the anxiety chewing at itself inside her gut, that she did okay. No one will ever find out, and even though Itachi is going to join a world-class criminal organization, he will be safe. Kisame will watch out for him, because Kisame isn't heartless, and Itachi will watch out for Kisame because he made a deal. The children won't die horrible deaths in Iron, and the massacre of an entire bloodline is not her sin to bear.

She admits that maybe she's on edge and that, perhaps, having been surrounded by noise and life for the entire journey to Iron makes the silence of her solo travels a little more oppressive than

usual. She feels like, maybe a little lost, or not grounded. Everything's sort of hazy and not entirely real. A certain numbness, or maybe aggravation? It's the bitch of a downward spiral she is desperate to hold at bay.

Ryuishi just knows that she needs grounding, needs something familiar and safe to her. She needs something that reminds her why she does what she does, and why she works so hard. She needs a little bit of warmth in her bones to chase away the cold that seems to have settled inside.

She needs her Sunshine.

Returning by herself is strange, because there seems to be a lingering emptiness that calls out and resonates inside of her. She feels like a criminal returning to the scene of a crime, but now is one of the few times she will be able to visit undetected.

The loss of the Uchiha clan has put stress on village security in a major way. As a clan, they rounded out the forces of the inner workings and external forces of Konoha, but now that they are gone, there are holes in places there should not be. The police force is decimated completely, and ANBU forces are left with incomplete teams. Torture and intelligence departments are understaffed and working furiously to find answers, but with less of a workforce, they are floundering. Even the bureaucratic sector is hit hard, having lost important managers and archivists.

Over the years, the Uchiha planted members throughout the ranks of Konoha ninja, and after the massacre their loss is evident. It isn't permanently crippling, though. In time, other clans will fill the void, conglomerating more power to themselves. More than that, the civilian sector will also push to fill the gap, and more non-clan and first-generation ninja will make their way into the ranks.

But right now, everybody is scrambling to pick up the slack while also expending more manpower than usual to hunt down the perpetrator. There are whole squads dedicated to suppressing the panic right

now, and she knows for a fact that there are teams out of the village, scouring the continent, discreetly hunting Uchiha Itachi.

They won't find him. If they couldn't find him when he was slowed down with five children and a fellow missing-nin, they sure as hell won't find him when he is free to exert his power to the fullest.

If there is a silver lining to this terrible, horrible event, though, it is that the lack of resources that Konoha is experiencing right now gives her an opportunity to catch up with something dear to her heart. It's not like she endorses a genocide for the sake of seeing Naruto, but she isn't above taking advantage of a horrible tragedy.

Still, she can't help but feel guilty at how very easy it is to sneak inside Konoha at this point in time. It shouldn't be such a simple thing to crawl through over the wall and slip in through the training grounds. She's so used to dodging patrols and hiding every other second that just leaping through the trees seems... wrong, somehow.

But it doesn't seem so wrong when she slips into the familiar rundown apartment building and sees a blond-headed boy sleeping soundly in his bed. It doesn't seem like anything other than relieving to trace her eyes over his peaceful face.

Ryuishi creeps inside his apartment, silent and fluid like water through a crack, and she settles her things in a corner. She takes the world's quietest shower and the most *satisfying* pee, and she maneuvers her way onto his bed. He looks so calm in the faint moonlight, his breaths so even and tranquil.

He has grown since she has been away, her little Sunshine. He's bigger now, his baby fat melting away into lean muscles and sinew, his chubby little cheeks beginning to show the first signs of the facial features beneath. He's almost eight, and she has missed so much. Letters from Misaki detailing his life just aren't the same as being able to watch him grow.

Her weight shifts the slightest bit, and he mumbles nonsense and lets out a quiet snort before rolling over to lie on her stomach. She savors it, the smell of ramen and paint, the warmth and love she feels in her heart. His weight fills the absence of the baby in the sling around her and soothes her anxieties and worries.

If she can just hold him here, just keep him safe, then maybe things will be alright.

Ryuishi wakes up, and somebody is screaming in her fucking ear.

The heavy shroud of grogginess lingers over her head, fogging it up. No thought fills her mind, and the desire to sleep more is all she can truly feel at this point. The blankets around her are a warm, safe nest insulating her from what she knows to be less comfortable air, and the pillow beneath her head is so fucking soft, it's insane. Shit must be spun from puppy barks and kitten purrs, that's how fucking nice it is.

"WHEN DID YOU GET HERE? HOW DID YOU EVEN GET IN-"

Sunlight trickles in through an open window, and it takes her a moment to figure out why there is a window at all. She was fairly certain that she was back in the bachelor's quarters in Kiri, and there weren't any windows in those concrete rooms. Her memories slowly remind her that she hasn't been in them for years, and she sleepily scowls and shoves her face back into the pillow, nuzzling into it. Belly down, she curls the blankets tighter around herself and settles in to return to her dreams.

"-I MISSED YOU SO MUCH! I NEED TO TELL YOU-"

Or she would, if somebody wasn't fucking screaming. Who the fuck is doing that? Why are they so loud? Can't they see the sun in the sky? It's not time to be up yet, it's time to pretend that the world doesn't exist, and there is only the sweet, sweet call of slumber.

"-SO WE CAN DO ANYTHING! AND-"

"Nnnngh," she grumbles, trying to cover her ears. "No."

"Nee-san!" the cry comes, then small hands pushing her shoulders, rocking her body back and forth. The bed beneath them shifts with the amount of movement going on on top of it, and she wonders idly if this is how children usually break their beds.

"Nee-san, You have to wake up!" Naruto orders, excitement filling him. She's back, she's back! She didn't forget him, and she isn't too busy! She came home, and she spent the night, and he wonders where she has been. Misaki-nee always says she's busy and that there are things that she has to do, but he missed her so much, and he doesn't care if she has to work. He just wants her here, with him, cooking food and being there.

He has so much to show her, like the new recipe for smoke bombs, and how much better he can do math! She has to hear about all the cool pranks he's pulled, and how much he grew! Four inches, four whole inches! He'll be a giant soon! She just needs to *wake up* .

"No," she states again.

"Nee-san," he whines, throwing himself on top of her. The impact shakes the air out of her lungs, and she groans, curling into a ball.

"Nooooooooo," she protests, covering her eyes with the blanket. It's not time for this, it's time to sleep, and he should sleep, because that's what people do. They go to fucking bed, and they shut their eyes and shit.

Silence fills the room, and she sighs out in content. Even with his body draped over her, she feels comfortable. She lets herself go again, drifting off.

A sniffle shakes the air, muffled against her side.

Her eyes immediately snap open.

She shoves the blankets off of herself, almost instantly awake. Even the cool air of the room helps, causing a rash of goosebumps to break out everywhere it touches. Naruto lays face down in the mess of sheets on her lap, his yellow hair bright and shining against the white.

"Hey, hey, don't cry," she soothes, her hands going to his back on instinct alone, rubbing soothing circles. "It's alright Sunshine, I'm here."

Another snuffle, and he doesn't answer. His hands curl into the sheets and he buries his face, hiding it from view. Fuck, fuck, no, not this. No tears, she didn't mean to. Naruto can't be sad, it's not right. He needs to be happy, because she can do something right, can't she?

"Come on now, I'm awake now," she begs. No response. "I'll even make breakfast, yah?" she tries.

"BREAKFAST!" Naruto shouts, popping up from his place on her lap. She takes in his clear eyes, no red to be seen anywhere at all, and scowls. There isn't even a hint of discomfort on that face.

"You manipulative little shit," she accuses, shoving him back gently, panic easing out of her heart. She takes a deep breath, calming her frayed nerves. He should have never been able to trick her like that. "Fake crying, that's a low blow, Sunshine."

"You're awake now," he answers with a mischievous grin, propping himself back up, no sign of guilt anywhere on his features at all. She wonders if he will ever know the kind of distress his false tears brought her. Probably not.

She sighs and supposes that she is awake now. There's no going back to sleep, not after that heart attack waiting to happen. Still, she

doesn't want to give in to him. Rewarding this kind of behavior will mean that he will do it again in the future, the brat.

"I guess," she answers, thinking on it. "And I did say I would cook breakfast..."

"Yah!"

"... So I think I'll make oatmeal," she settles, knowing his taste buds.

His face morphs into a pout, and she snorts to herself, sliding him off her lap and pushing herself off of the mattress. His cute little pout is burned into her mind, so innocent and guileless. It helps her ease back into her calm.

There is a shuffling sound, followed by the solid thump of feet hitting floor, then racing footsteps. Naruto speeds past her in his pajamas, turning the corner and disappearing out of sight.

"I call bathroom first!" he shouts.

"HEY!"

She follows, and the door slams shut in front of her, cutting off her chances of victory. That tricky little bastard, she thinks with a fond smile. He's growing up just fine. She's glad to see him even if it means she has to wait with a full bladder and morning breath. She waits outside the door patiently for her turn.

An hour later, and she is rethinking her statement as Naruto messily shovels eggs into his mouth. She thought she could resist the brat, but his puppy dog eyes are some next level shit.

"Do you even clean when I'm away?" she scolds, piling yet another newly cleaned dish onto the drying rack. The sink was full when she came in, and she had to wash pots and pans to even get started on breakfast. It's like college all over again, cleaning ramen out of

mixing bowls and wondering what in the world is growing in the back of the fridge.

"Not really," he answers honestly around a mouthful of rice.

"That's bullshit, Sunshine," she gripes, cleaning out the sink. Her wary eyes scan the surrounding buildings outside the window for watchers, and her guard is one hundred percent up. She's paranoid about being seen, or drawing attention to herself. It's dangerous for her to be here, even with slack security.

"I'm busy, dattebayo!" he protests, "School is hard, and then I have to do homework, and visiting Misaki-nee, and then the pranks take a lot of time-"

"Oh?" she interrupts. "And how is school?"

He scowls and crosses his arms, turning to glare at the wall to the side. He's adorable, in that overly angry kid way. "It's dumb," he pouts. "The teachers are stupid and nothing makes sense at all. I can't say things like 'ass' or 'douche' or 'shit', because those are *bad words* ."

Ryuishi chokes on air and coughs violently into her suds-covered hand, trying to stifle her laugh. The thought of the uptight Konoha forces being around a foul-mouthed child delights her in ways it should not.

"-And it's really hard to sit still in class, and everything is really boring all the time. The kids are snobs, reading is impossible," he continues, ignoring her outburst. "And Kanji is dumb."

"Kanji is hard," she agrees slowly, finding her voice again, thinking for a moment.

"Naruto?" she asks hesitantly. "... Do you have school today?"

The boy doesn't meet her eyes.

Shit, she thinks. She should have known better, but it's been so long since school, or even the Academy, and she honestly forgets that they exist sometimes. It's late summer, and there's no reason he shouldn't be in class.

No reason other than her.

Guilt and paranoia flood her heart just the littlest bit. What if someone comes looking for him? One day of playing hooky shouldn't hurt anything, but Naruto is the type of child who skips out of classes fairly often. It's really not her fault, but she can't help but wonder if her influence has done him any good at all.

He's not the same as when they first met. He's more... abrasive, less eager to please than she remember him being. He isn't desperate for attention or starving for affection as much these days. He curses, and he walks like he has something to prove. A sort of determination that was never there before, and a sort of fierceness in his depths. She sees little bits of things that were never shown in canon, traits he didn't have then, and she knows where they came from.

She tries not to think about it, examining the mess around them. If he has nowhere to go, then they can both stay in.

"Well, I guess that means that today you'll be helping me clean this pigsty," she sighs, "But tomorrow you're going back."

"Tomorrow is the weekend."

"Quit while you're ahead, Sunshine."

He sticks his tongue out at her, but she can see the relief flooding his features. One weekend shouldn't hurt anything, and she's missed him so much.

One weekend, she thinks, finishing up the dishes. One weekend, then maybe a visit to Gaara. Then more work, more traveling, more time to spend all by herself. More time to wonder if Itachi has met

Kisame yet, if they're getting along, and if he's alright. More time to ponder how Zabuza is, if he is healthy, if he's happy. More time to wonder about the morality and efficiency of her life choices, to question and doubt herself.

"Do I have to help you clean?" comes a well-loved, if very annoying voice shaking her from her thoughts. Later, she will slide back into that darkness, but only when Naruto and Gaara aren't there to chase it away.

Gaara, it turns out a while later, doesn't chase away the darkness, so much as he doesn't allow a single second for it to find her.

The moment she leaves Konoha and treks to Suna, he seems to know about it. She doesn't even get a full day of rest before the redheaded boy is there, in her hotel room, laying ominously in her bed when she edges out of the bathroom in a towel.

The worst part isn't that he's there, or that he has shown some truly alarming stalking skills, but that she is still being observed by Suna, and therefore, he isn't exactly alone when he shows up. No, Ryuishi gets out of the shower to be greeted by not only the broiling heat and searing light of the desert coming in through her hotel room window, but their newest chaperon as well.

"Gaara?" she asks the blank-faced boy staring at her from her own damn pillows. "Who is that?"

Sea-foam green eyes follow her gaze, and really, she doesn't mind nudity at all, but the stranger certainly seems to. He's tall, and well-formed in the way that shinobi tend to be. She can't tell much about his hair, because he's wearing that head covering and bandage combo that seems to be popular in Suna, but the red markings on his face seem familiar to her.

"Baki-san," Gaara intones, and Ryuishi feels distinctly uncomfortable in this situation. That man has a glare like woah, and he's eyeing her

like he wants to set her on fire. Probably, or he's really upset that a woman is showing so much skin. Or he's awkward around partially naked people, but that isn't her fault. They are in her room, and they should be the ones feeling weird, not her.

"Ah," she answers.

Man, if he could shoot kunai from his eyes, she would impaled a billion times over. Is he angry? Is he constipated? Why is he so mad-looking?

"Gaara," she says. "Did I do something to upset him?"

He shakes his head no, and the instructor continues to glare. Maybe... maybe that's just his face? If so, he has a mean case of resting bitch face. Like, he might need to go see a doctor about how angry he looks.

"Mmmmm," she hums, sidestepping her way to her bag on the bedside table. She doesn't want to present her back to this guy, it feels too much like giving an opening to an enemy. "I'll go get dressed, and then we can pretend none of this ever happened." Which is exactly what happens, sort of.

'Sort of', because Gaara, emboldened by the ever-present demon cackling in his ear, insists on watching her get ready. Not her getting dressed, because he waits until she put clothes on at least, but doing her hair, her makeup, and morning routine seems to hold his attention like nothing else.

It's a little bit difficult to put on moisturizer and eyeliner with such serious attention being paid to her, and she feels a little self-conscious about it. Baki is glaring at her from his corner of the room through use of the mirror, and Gaara levels his unwavering gaze as she works as well.

"Why are you painting your eyes with color dust?" he asks as she brushes on a light eye-shadow.

She shrugs at her reflection, blending the colors together. "I like the way it makes me look," she answers, and that is that. He accepts it for the answer it is and lets it go.

Ryuishi preps herself carefully, and eventually they make it to the streets of Suna. Gaara insists on walking himself instead of being carried, and for a moment, her heart aches. He's growing up so fast. She can still remember the tiny little thing he used to be, swinging by himself on the playground in the shade of the day. Now he's all of eight or nine years old, walking on his own two feet instead of clutching at her shirt.

She wrestles with sadness for a moment before his hand slips inside her own, and she can't help the smile that grows on her face.

Not too old just yet, she thinks.

The midmorning sun is blazing overhead, fierce and unrelenting in the clear blue sky. Wind whips around them, strong and free, but Ryuishi relishes the feel of it on her skin.

Little footsteps echo her own, and their chaperon doesn't make a sound at all when he walks on the hard baked earth. Respectable, and telling. He's a good shinobi, one capable of stealth. He'd have to be great at his job to be assigned the jinchuuriki of his village.

Ryuishi slides out of the way of another traveler, Gaara's hand gripped tight in hers. "Looks like a good day for market," she comments in passing.

Indeed, it is a good day. Suna is very, very slowly beginning to recover from where it was. It's still in an economic depression, but with the influx of goods and trade, she hopes that in a few years it will become less of a depression than a recession, and then from there maybe a stable market.

There are more people in the bazaar than she remembers, and more goods as well. Not by much, but it is there. Diversity where once

there was nothing at all, and from what she has heard in rumors, the Kazekage is doing his damndest to encourage what there is. There are whispers of him reaching out to other foreign traders, ones not originally from her caravan. Her contacts in Rice are quite happy for the attention.

It's funny, that as he tries to pull away from her influence, he steps further into it. He's a good leader, she'll give him that, but Ryuishi made this damn trade system. She's worked with the farmers from planting season to harvest, listened to their complaints, and helped remake the entire crop system. She advised the traders, brought in new blood to an old system, and more than anything, she's helped them raise their profits dependably for years. She knows it inside out, from the rice growers, the vegetables, the herb producers, to the caravan masters and merchant lords that travel the entire continent looking for deals.

Rasa is clever with his local economics, but Ryuishi works on a much larger scale than him, and while she respects his loyalty to his village, she abhors the way he treats his children.

"Aneue," says Gaara, interrupting her thoughts. "You're sweating."

"Uhhh," she responds gracefully, pondering it for a second. "I guess so?"

"Aneue is hot," he states tonelessly, staring straight ahead while they walk. Her neck itches and she fights the urge to scratch it, knowing that it is the weight of the jounin's gaze that makes it tingle. Frankly she's not even that hot, it's just light perspiration, totally normal. She doesn't know what he's on about, considering she sweats in front of him all the time.

"Gaara, we're in a desert in the sun, of course I'm a little warm," she answers, watching him out of the corner of her eye. Count her as confused as hell. "Why does it even matter?"

"Heat sickness," Gaara explains bluntly, and she wonders again, why that? She's nowhere near that point.

"I'm pretty sure that's a long way off yet. Don't worry about it," she states, brushing it off. He turns his eyes on her, as if to ask, *Are you sure?* She quirks a brow at him, because she's not some fragile doll, and this level of concern is a little too much.

Inside his head, Gaara does something strange. He frets, because Aneue is a civilian, and she's sweating! What if she gets dehydrated, and she can't tell? Can civilians tell when they're getting too hot? He thinks so, but what if Aneue is different? She acts different than the normal traders and merchants...

She's usually so cool, and now she's warm because of the sun. Should he kill the sun? *Can* he kill the sun? No, that's foolish, he can't do that.

We could try, whispers that voice inside of him, **we could try and destroy everything**. His hand tightens around hers, and he forces it back, concentrating on the fingers locked with his.

Aneue is there, and he smells the soft scent of flowers and saltwater coming from her. It makes him feel less distant, more aware of everything around him, like opening his eyes after he's drifted. He likes it, the way she makes him feel, that soft warmth inside his ribs, fluttery and safe. Aneue won't leave him, not forever. She always, always comes back.

"So tell me kiddo, what have you learned while I've been away, busting ass?" she asks him.

"Bad language," he mutters instinctively before considering his answer. With the new instructors he's learned many things, like how to throw a kunai and toss a shuriken. He doesn't know why he needs to know that, because sand works much better than those metal things, and it is much more accurate as well. Sand can crush, tear, and polish until there is nothing left but blood, so why should he sink

to using a blade? Even Temari and Kankuro know better than that, what with their recent choices in weapons.

Should he tell her that? Would she... would she be scared of him? He doesn't want her to be scared of him, not like Temari and Kankuro still are. What if she leaves? What if she runs away? He'd hurt so bad. Aneue can never leave, she can never run. Gaara won't let her. She has to stay, always return, always. She's *his*.

He carefully traces patterns on the back of their joined hand, breathing in and out softly, listening to her voice as she barter with a teenage boy about some sweets. Aneue wouldn't be scared if she told him. She was there when he was so angry, when he felt himself change. When everybody else was afraid and angry, Aneue held him and told him she loved him. She proved it to him.

Gaara can tell her anything, he's sure of it. Aneue always comes back.

"I learned how to wield traditional shinobi tools. I do not think they are very effective," Gaara tells her finally, and she turns to him, confused for a second. It's been like twenty fucking minutes, what the hell is he talking about?

Oh, right, she asked him a question.

"Like, kunai and shuriken?" she asks, skeptical as he nods his head. He's just now being introduced to bladed weapons? That's crazy, back in Kiri kids practically left the womb and were handed a knife. Then again, Kiri was a completely messed up place, so maybe she shouldn't be using it as an example in her head.

"So why aren't they effective?" she queries, confused. Even though she can't throw them, she still carries a pouch or two for various reasons.

"Sand is better," he tells her seriously, and she snorts.

"Maybe, but what if you need to cut up your food? Or skin an animal? Can your sand cut bubblegum out of your hair?"

He turns to give her a considering face, but his face twists in confusion at that last statement. She realizes that she has never seen Gaara chew gum in his entire life, and he doesn't have long hair.

Behind them, Baki snorts. She clears her own throat in embarrassment, very glad that no one was actually there when she did get gum stuck in her hair. No one but the trees and stones in the Land of Rivers get to know about that.

"Okay, maybe not that last one, but having a knife can be useful," she defends adamantly. There's tons of stuff that a bladed weapon can do that grain particles can't, and specialization in young ninja is what leads to their deaths.

Ryuishi battles back the images of dead children, broken and mangled, scattered across the halls of the Academy. She fights with the images of their twisted corpses staring at her with glassy eyes from pools of cooling blood.

No more, she prays, not my boys, please.

"Aneue?" Gaara asks worriedly, tugging on her hand. The contact snaps her back to the present, and she forces a smile onto her face.

"Ahaha, sorry," she laughs. "I got lost in thought for a second."

He nods, but he doesn't stop watching her. Sometimes, he wonders about Aneue, because he knows her. He knows her hugs and her kisses, her smiles and her laughs. He has seen her frustrated and upset, but he doesn't know everything. Where does she go when she isn't here with him? Who hurt her so bad, cut her up so much that she still has marks? Why does she come here, and why does she love him?

He knows there are some things not right about her, like the way she goes quiet sometimes, and the way she looks hard and cold. There's something about her that makes him feel small sometimes, almost like he's standing on the village walls looking up, and there is nothing but the night sky above him.

A shade, whispers the voice inside his head. **Not from here.**

He shakes his head, and figures it doesn't matter. Aneue loves him, and he loves Aneue. That's what matters.

"After we're done, you wanna go lizard fishing?" she asks. He nods his head, because that does sound fun. The thing inside can say all the mean things it wants, but as long as he has Aneue, he'll be okay. Anyone who tries to change that, to take her away-well.

The voice and him both agree, they will kill them. Aneue is theirs. She can't stay forever, but they can enjoy the time she has with them, knowing she will come back.

In time, though, all things come to an end, and Ryuishi lets go of the crutch that is her boys. It's not fair to be around them when she isn't quite herself. Her mind keeps wandering, and though their voices fill her with warmth and love, they also draw conflicting emotions inside her.

Everything these days seems to do that, and she's getting really tired of it. For once, she wants to know what it would be like to not constantly doubt herself, or feel like there is a war going on inside her skull. She wishes she was better at handling stress, and that maybe she could have friends without some convoluted scheme involving a thousand outside variables.

Wouldn't it be fucking fantastic if she could hang out with Hatake without the underlying knowledge that he's trying his damndest to squirrel information out of her? It would be so cool to hang out with Wood Boy and know he isn't going to stab her in the kidney or treat

her weird because of her status as the Rakki Ryu. Hell, it would be cool as fuck to eat a single meal with Orochimaru without the thick, underlying tension whispering in her ear that if she says something wrong, he might actually cut her throat again.

Ryuishi hums as she stares out over the open sea, and she tries to not throw a one man pity party. It's beautiful out, and the ocean is so calm that the night sky reflects on its surface. A thousand million stars stare down at her from heaven, and a thousand million more look up from the ocean's surface. The smell of brine and saltwater tickles her nose while sound of waves crashing against the cliffs drones on, a rhythmic white noise.

Out of all Orochimaru's bases, she likes the island hideout best. Not just because of the ocean, but because it reminds her of old-timey castles in Europe, only warmer. The climate here is temperate and mild, if a little cold at night.

Sitting down on the sharp slate cliffs and letting the wind tangle her long black hair is melancholy in a way, when it should be wondrous. Everything is so big, so beautiful around her that she should be grateful to see the sight. Tiny pinpricks of light illuminating the world, the splash of moonlight against the darkness of night... it should take her breath away.

Instead, it makes her feel like she is small and alone, with nothing but the water to comfort her.

Her father would have loved to see a sight like this, she thinks. Her mom would sit beside her, and they'd hold hands like they always do, the sappy schmucks. Her brothers would be fishing, or drinking, and her little sister would be asleep at this late hour. She would have rested her head on her older sister's shoulder and trusted her to watch over her.

To this day, Ryuishi still feels their loss. She can almost see their ghosts on the stones around her, their images made of starlight and memories.

The wind blows her hair across her face, and the moment is gone. If she's honest, she's learned to live without them even though it hurts. Rather than phantoms to haunt her, she wishes her unit was here.

Zabuza would rest on her legs, silent save for his grunts, and his stupid spiky hair would tickle her. His brown eyes would reflect the stars, and she'd poke and tease him about the tan line has under his silly mask. His weight and warmth would be comfortable and safe, and the smell of weapons oil would be as serene as it is nostalgic.

Kisame would rest behind her, letting her sit between his sprawled legs and lean against his chest. He's always been the one to support them, and this would be no different. He would be a guiding presence at her back, always watching out for them, making sure they are safe. He'd grin that stupid grin of his, and everything would be alright.

Savory Horus the falcon-headed, she misses them. She wonders if they are ever even going to see each other again.

(Unbeknownst to her, the time for that approaches quicker than she could ever imagine. Because somewhere, far away, a man and a boy pack their bags and begin a search, the golden shine of a medallion cutting through the mist.)

AN: So I wanted to show how subtle changes are beginning to become obvious. I also think this chapter is a bit choppy, but it's meant to be. Next chapter is packed full of the feels, and is really big, and after that we have two or three chapter until a time skip, then canon. Things are going to be different. Also, they are fairly big in size. And feels.

I want to thank my lurkers, faver's, and followers. A big old hug to all my reviewers, bless your hearts. I am unashamedly a review hungry person, and I like hearing your suggestions.

Everybody go shower Enbi with praises because this is two chapters in one week, and it's all thanks to them! Enbi is best beta.

Question: What do you think the characters first thoughts about Ryuishi were, after their first encounter with her? OR What do you think people ponder about Ryuishi's scars?

Meeting Almost Whole

I do not own Naruto. Also, everybody thank Enbi for editing this early because she cares about you.

It has taken him twenty-one years, a shinobi war, a civil war, two massacres, the loss of his brother, and the loss of his best tool, but he has done it.

Momochi Zabuza, last of the Kiri no Kaijū, has defected from Kirigakure.

He thinks that perhaps it started when he first saw her, years ago, illuminated by the scarlet glow of the red light district's crimson lanterns. He remembers seeing her then, a whore's child dressed up in a fancy kimono, her hair neatly styled and pinned with gleaming metal, howling at the corpse of her attacker, blood still dripping down her chin and coating her hands. He recalls thinking her a monster, just like him. He wanted to own her, to use her, to wield her as his own tool, but he also remembers questioning the might of the village. How could such a powerful and divine structure let such strength go unnoticed? It was the first time he had ever questioned Kirigakure.

It would not be the last.

He questioned it again in the Academy, where he was told to wait for his time, to submit to those stronger than him. But the older students were not stronger than him. They were weak and pitiful, easily broken beneath his blade. He mowed through them without remorse, and they watched as he proved himself.

But she did not fall. When she came, she struggled and fought. He learned that day that his tool would not submit because he told her to. She demanded he prove himself worthy of her, and like Kubikiribōchō, she remade herself in his blood.

Then came the war, and he questioned his country again. The village should utilize its tools efficiently, but it did not. There was no need for her to be on a frontal assault unit. She was a mid-range weapon, not a close quarters combatant. It was improper handling of of personnel.

However, he will not deny her adaptability, and she settled into her new place well. Strange as it was, the war held some of his better memories. Things made sense back then. There was no socialization or wordplay needed-it was fighting and surviving, and they did it so well.

The duo became a trio, filling a gap Zabuza did not know he had. Zabuza acknowledged the might of the older apprentice. Kisame was a good leader and a strong fighter. He was not only brutal and intimidating, but he was skilled as well. Kisame made sense in ways Ryuishi did not. He acknowledged the value of tools and knew the natural order of things.

The strong survive and the weak die. Shinobi were tools of their village, things to be directed and used by the Kage for the sake of the village, and stronger shinobi were allowed to use weaker ones as tools of their own. It was the way of Kirigakure.

Kisame did not paint his face uselessly or cry at the sight of his classmates corpses. Kisame did not spend forty minutes in the bathroom, or ball his fists in anger at their commanding officers. He made sense all the time, where he could only understand her half of it.

In the daylight they would rampage, and the beasts inside of them would cry out in joy. The battlefields of the front lines became their classrooms, and their enemies became their teachers. Blood was their lesson, and death was their test. They used everything that Kirigakure had taught them to survive. It was kill, or be killed.

They grew, and they became a trio of great weapons for Kirigakure. The more he fought, though, the more he recognized that he wasn't

fighting for his village. He was fighting for the man with the blue skin and the sword skills that rivaled his own. He was fighting for the girl with long, dark hair and the ability to drag men into their watery graves. He struggled so that they could struggle with him, and they fought for it as well.

The Kage did not save him from the onslaught of Katon jutsu that could have burned him to a crisp, no, it was Kisame. Their commanding officer did not tear the leg off a woman for striking him, but Ryuishi did. The might of Kirigakure did not bind his wounds, feed him, or help him grow, his unit did. They were all tools for the village, but they sharpened each other as well.

He questioned everything, because if the stronger person used their tools so poorly, were they really the strongest? If they weren't, then who was? What was strength?

Then, she came to him. He remembers the redness of her eyes and the emptiness of her voice. She was broken in ways he could not fix, filled with cracks and chips he could not grind away. Zabuza would not understand until much later, but he knew enough then. She couldn't continue, and she was shattering. She had to fix herself.

I'll find you, he had said, and he meant it. He would always find her. From the streets of the akasen, to the classroom, to the battlefield, he would find her. He wore her scars and she wore his. That meant something.

In return, she had shown him what strength was.

Kirigakure burned, and people with painted faces just like hers danced through the streets. Civilians and orphans, gutter rats and whores, they screeched and howled with the crackling flames. The smell of the clogged waterways, oil, buildings, and people burning scented the night. Mist mingled with smoke until it hurt to breathe the very air itself, and he could hear her laughing. This was her anger and her wrath at the village for mishandling its tools, for treating them poorly and leaving them in the filth to die. This was her

retribution and denial. She would have no master, because none were worthy of her.

She took the people that everybody knew to be weak, and she turned them into strength. She showed them that anybody could be strong if handled properly. Every tool held the capability for strength, and these were hers.

She left, and the weeks after they spent cleaning up the rubble and the ashes, he knew it was not abandonment. She could have burned them right beside the village, but she didn't. She gave them a lesson, and a way to track her down.

The message was clear to Zabuza: when he had found the power to wield her, he could find his tool again.

It was not so clear to Kisame, his brother in all but blood. The older boy stewed in quiet rage ever since that night, and he spurned the memory of their teammate. Zabuza watched as the leader of their unit spat on her existence, using words like *traitor* and *liar* .

There were no such things. There was only power, and she proved that Kiri didn't have enough of it to use her as a tool.

Still, the remaining duo did well as Kiri shut down its borders and closed its ranks to rebuild. Some looked at them with suspicion and scorn, though, believing that they were as disloyal as their teammate.

They were not wrong.

Zabuza slew his own master, following her last advice to him, and he took Kubikiribōchō as his own. He grew further beside his battle brother, though the village spat at them. Hatred for their teammate ran rampant in the upper ranks, and in the absence of her, it was turned onto them.

The village was crippled, and everybody knew it. Supplies stolen, workforce gone, and the clans spirited away-there was anarchy. They withdrew from the war, and the next years were spent controlling their own.

The Hōzuki, Yuki, and Kaguya that came back to find their compounds empty and children gone grew bitter. They blamed the Mizukage for their loss, and the remaining villagers for their treachery. In turn, the villagers that remained grew weary under the doubled workload foisted upon them, and they grew fearful of the clans' spite and power. There was tension, thick on the fog-laden streets. Before long, the clans started an uprising, rebelling against the others in hatred. They cared only for themselves, wallowing in their loss, and they blamed everyone but themselves for it. They struck out, and in turn, they were struck down.

The Purges began, and Zabuza stood beside Kisame and watched as the village cut down those that tried to stand higher than they could reach. They saw the corpses of the clans be piled high as the Purge continued throughout The Land of Water. Every traitor, every spy, every ninja or civilian under suspicion was culled from the ranks. It was only their place as Swordsmen of the Mist that kept them from joining the mass graves.

A waste, he had thought. They would not have turned rabid if the Mizukage knew how to use his tools. You don't bend your own blade, or treat it roughly, or it will fail you and the fault will not be with the weapon.

After the missions and battles, the boys would sit together and eat the tasteless gruel inside the barracks, and Kisame would talk. He would talk about his master, and the pride of Kirigakure, or how disgusting the food tasted. Squads, missions, bowel movements, wounds, or fights, they spoke of it all.

Once, he talked about her.

"We don't need her," he said. "We've always been stronger."

Zabuza had grunted in agreement, because they didn't *need* her. They could survive just fine without her as they did now, but that did not mean they did not want her there. They were strong with or without her, but they would always be strongest as a unit.

The time came for specialization, and Zabuza was slotted for the ranks of hunter-nin. He was stealthy and quiet, and he excelled in their harsh training. Every time they beat him down, he stood again, and he looked at the medallion hanging from the hilt of his blade.

He would gain strength, and he would grow. His tool was out there, and she would not accept a weak master. So he rose in the ranks, and he was soon granted access outside of the Land of Water. Hunter-nin became more than chasing down traitors, it became a collection agency. Anyone with a high enough bounty became a target, and he wove his way through the continent, looking for strength.

He found it the same way he imagines she did. Huddling in the cold, starving and scrawny, a child without a purpose, indeed, he saw what she saw. He saw potential in the boy near death, and he saw her inside him as well. Dark eyes searching for a way, and dark hair tangled in filth. Delicate features and nimbleness in the limbs, and the desire to prove himself worthy. A Yuki survivor, one of the last in Water Country.

You will be my weapon, he had said. Just as the orphans with painted faces became hers.

His name was Haku, and he belonged to no one but Zabuza. In time, the differences between his first tool and his second became clear. Where Ryuishi never submitted to him and never tired of the constant battling between them, Haku submitted fully and willingly. Where she reveled in battle and became a monster, Haku held an aversion to violence that had to be trained out of him, and the boy never seemed to develop a monstrous side. Where she was his equal, Haku was his student. Zabuza owned him, and him alone.

Haku belonged to no village or master. He had no loyalty to outside ideas or people.

Zabuza trained the boy when he had no missions, and he took lessons from his missing teammate. He hid the boy in plain view, and taught him everything he could think of, everything she might have thought to teach a child, no matter how nonsensical it seemed to Zabuza. He taught him how to kill, and her memory whispered to him. *Tell him stories, and socialize him like we were not*, it said. *Show him affection, though we may not have known it ourselves*. So Zabuza did, and he watched the progress.

The boy, ever eager to please, did everything in his power to rise to the challenge. He trained relentlessly and followed every order without pause, desperate to be of use, to be the best. He absorbed the lessons like a sponge, and he took initiative on his own.

Haku was his weapon, on par with Kubikiribōchō, but there were traits that made him question Kirigakure even further. Haku was endlessly, annoyingly kind. It was an attribute he was unfamiliar with, because nothing that came from Kirigakure was ever kind. Niceness and gentleness were not characteristics fostered in the Mist, they were weak and pitiful.

Or, they were supposed to be.

For all his inherent *goodness*, Haku was anything but weak. He was talented beyond measure, and he was beyond the capabilities of his age group by far. He showed an instinctive mastery of his Kekkei Genkai and a pinpoint accuracy with thrown weapons. Even more impressive was that his ninjutsu skill was so far progressed that he could form attacks one-handed, which was unheard of. Haku, who delighted in small, furry animals, and who never attacked without prompting, was a prodigy in terms of strength.

He was strong, and he was loving, and Zabuza was as confused as he was proud. Haku became a model weapon, but he wasn't truly a weapon. Zabuza did not feel pride in simple tools, he relished them

because they were easy, not because he enjoyed spending time with them. Tools did not make him feel some sort of uncomfortable warmth in his torso when they slept peacefully at night, or cause him worry when they bled too long.

Yet if ninja were not tools, what were they?

The questioner ate at his mind in his free time. Life became strange, a mix of missions, training with Kisame, teaching Haku, and wondering about things that didn't make sense.

Then, there wasn't training with Kisame any longer, because Kisame was not there. When news reached him of his leader's abandonment, he felt nothing but bitterness and begrudging respect. Bitterness, because he was the last of the Kiri no Kaijū to remain in the Mist, and he was sure that the blue-skinned man was destined to find their teammate first. Respect, because not only did Kisame finally take the sword from his master, but he cut down swaths of the Cipher division and evaded even Zabuza, a hunter-nin captain, when he fled.

The time for pondering was over, and Zabuza turned toward his work with a new ferocity. His place in the ranks gave him an advantage, and all information about missing-nin from his village passed through him first. He hunted far and wide for information on his team, manically searching with Haku by his side, training harder than ever. He was Momochi Zabuza, and *they would not leave him behind*.

Then, months later, he found a clue, but it did not fill him with hope. A squadron of hunter-nin after the bounty Kumo offered for The Copy Nin, Hatake Kakashi, found slaughtered on the border between River and Wave. And their deaths did not come by any Leaf Shinobi's hands, either.

Zabuza looked out at the lake filled with carnage, days later, and he could taste her involvement in it. It was written in the floating corpses with their throats opened to the sun, and the mangled bodies' missing limbs. He saw it in the drag marks on the shore line that

could come from nothing but chains, and felt it in the faint echoes of chakra that resonated with his own. Ryuishi had been here, but she had been alone. Kisame had not found her, if he had even tried at all. His unit was out there, but they were not together. Kisame had let his distaste for their teammate consume him, and she was still on her own.

Idiots, the both of them. The unit was strongest when they were together. What use was there in denying that?

When he returned to Kirigakure, it was with the foul taste of rage on his tongue. If it was not for Haku, he would have abandoned the village then, but the boy was still young, and he was not ready to take on the dangers that being a missing-nin presented.

Zabuza focused on gathering information and hoarding his strength. He would become the greatest shinobi in the village, and destroy the Mizukage. The Mizukage, who used his tools, his people and shinobi, so poorly. The Mizukage, who drove his forces into the ground, and who broke Zabuza's unit apart. He would overthrow the Kage, and he would remake this village.

He was not alone in this endeavor.

"Terumī Mei," she introduced herself. With pale, clear skin and long, silky hair, she looked better suited to the Seduction Corps than the Strike Force, but her looks were misleading. She was strong, and she was smart. She aimed to topple the old regime, and she saw him with her when she did.

"One of the last loyal Swordsmen of the Mist, you're a symbol of tradition and strength to the people," she said. "But you're questioning the old ways."

He grunted out a non-answer. It was none of her business if he did.

"You're practically the leader of the hunter-nin at this point, near the top in terms of power, taking orders from the Mizukage himself, " she

stated. "I wonder if he knows that you're looking for-"

"What do you want?" he interrupted.

"I want what you want. I want the Land of Water to be as great as it was in the beginning, recognizing that strength comes in different forms. I want the glory back for the Seven Swordsmen, and a working country instead of a brutal mess. I want the Rakki Ryuu back on our side."

He had turned his eyes on her then, wondering what his chances were should it come to combat. It would not be an easy one, considering her bloodline talents, but he would fight, should it come to that.

She had raised her hands in deference even as he examined her, her colorful hair burning bright against the haze of the fog.

"It's not what you think. I won't say I'm happy with what she did to the Village, but I will say that she has exactly what this country needs to get back to the top. Contacts, supplies, allies, money, and power, the Kiri no Ningyo has been busy since the Burning of Kiri," the redhead said.

Zabuza knows this. The rumors are prevalent through the Land of Rivers. "She hated the mist, what makes you think she changed after all this time?" he asked.

"She hated the Kiri because she hated what it stood for. That is why she left. If we change what Kiri is, I have no doubt she would aid us."

He snorts derisively, but he listens. It's idealistic, because she was a tool beyond measure, and they were deluded if they thought that she would return to such a weak place.

"The Ningyo hated the mist, that is no secret, but she loved her unit. The Kiri no Kaijuu. The Siren, the Shark-" she turned her eyes on him, "-and the Demon."

"We can overthrow the Mizukage, but without trade and influence, nothing will change," she continued. "She can help us do that, but nobody can find her to ask."

Nobody, he heard, *but you* .

So he looked into it, took her up on her invitation. There is, indeed, a small force willing to rebel, but it is not enough, not near enough. They need funding and allies if they want to make changes for good. He likes the idea of it, a new Mist, but not enough to stay. When he leaves, he will help, but he belongs with his unit, not a village.

The day comes where he is satisfied with his progress, and the progress of his pupil. They have the power to leave unnoticed, and Zabuza has the strength to reclaim Ryuishi as his weapon.

The last of the Kiri no Kaijuu, the monsters born of the Bloody Mist, defects from the village, a child by his side and a legendary sword on his back, and he begins his hunt in earnest.

He will find his tool again.

Zabuza journeys out of the fog and crisp chill of Water Country. By boat and by foot, he and Haku eat up the distance between the island country and the main continent, heading west to the Land of Rivers, where the Rakki Ryu has grown most popular. Everything seems different now that he has no village to serve, no master to answer to.

He is Momochi Zabuza, and he is free.

Haku, who rarely journeyed past the border with him, is nervous, but is trained enough to not let it show. The temperature rises as they travel, and they leave the salty brine behind them. The earth beneath their feet is steady and full of growth, and even at the very beginning of his hunt, he feels the heavy weight of excitement stirring in his gut.

It has been years since her saw her last, rail-thin and on the cusp of puberty. How much will have changed?

They find the nearest port city to the border, a sprawling urban expanse fed by the trade from Water Country, Wind Country, and Fire Country. It is neater than Kirigakure in ways, but Zabuza knows that a city this size always hold a darker side, and he locates in no time at all. The clean docks melt into shabby alleyways and graffitied warehouses, piles of trash fill the air with a putrid stench, and puddles of human waste lay on the hard-packed earth. He navigates them with ease, looking for a sign.

He finds it in the form of an altar outside a bar, small gifts laid out on the tiny wooden structure. Candies, foods, little hairpins, bits of makeup, and vials of perfume are all laid before the coiled form of a metal dragon. This far in, there should be nothing on the altar, taken by the street rats and lowlifes, but nobody touches it.

"Zabuza-sama?" queries the boy by his side.

"Here," he grunts, unclipping the medallion from his sword for the first time since he hung it there. Haku follows wordlessly as he slips inside the closed doors uninvited. It's too early for the establishment to be open, but there is a woman behind the counter none the less. She is as old as they come, wrinkled and weathered by time, her face like leather.

"Can't you read? We're not open," she scolds. Zabuza ignores her and steps inside further.

"Not here to drink," he grunts. "She sent me."

"Who sent you?" she growls, and Zabuza slides the medallion over the counter, where the granny plucks it up without ever looking away from him.

The moment she does look down though, her body stills, frozen in shock. She looks up, surprise in her aged eyes, then back down,

closer at the medallion, then up again.

"You..." she breathes, and then she breaks out into a grin, bright as he has ever seen. She is missing teeth, he notices as she hands the metal back. "I always thought the Rakki Ryu story should be happier," she tells him in a papery voice. "There are too many sad ones already in the world."

He grunts, and she laughs like a child, hobbling from behind the counter to the back of the establishment, waving him along. The two shinobi follow her as she urges her hunched form onward and slides the back door open to the alleyway outside. Then she whistles through thin lips, sharp and grating, and it reminds him of the sound he heard ringing out through the streets on the night that Kiri burned to the ground. It is the same call, the sound of birdsong and monsters' howls.

Out of the shadows and grime, a gaggle of children with feathers, bones, and bottle caps in their hair begin herding him and his partner along, laughing and speaking in snippets. He allows them to swarm and lead the through the back alleys to a brothel, like the one where she grew up. Women dressed in robes peek out from behind paper screens to gawk at him and Haku, whispering behind cheap fans, but Zabuza does not care.

"Where is she?" he asks.

"The Odayaka Oni," rasps the husky voice of a woman who has smoked too many years. "I know you."

This woman is old too, but not as old as the bartender, and she grins to see the gleaming metal in his hands. Her hazel eyes alight with recognition, though he has never seen her before in his life, nor heard that name. The Gentle Demon?

She breathes in a draft from her long pipe, and the smoke in the room causes his nose to itch, but he makes no sound.

"I knew you when you walked the streets with our Lady as a child, before the war came," she says in a rough exhale, a stream of grey following her breath.

"Where is she?" he asks again, and she laughs, looking at him in the knowing way that all old women have.

"Somewhere in Wind Country I hear," she croaks. "Playing her games and plying her trade."

"Where in Wind?" he asks, and the woman meets his eyes unflinchingly, mirth in her gaze.

"She's not the same, you know. No one would be, after waiting all these years with so little hope."

The words are irritating to hear, because of course she won't be. He doesn't need to be reminded of how long she has waited, he knows it more than this old hag ever will.

"Where in Wind?" he grunts out for the final time, and the woman tells him where to check, a city a fair ways over the border.

He and Haku leave before the sun even sets, heading south. The temperature rises further, and Zabuza recalls how much he loathes the desert, with its dry air and merciless sun. The wind is relentless, blasting them with grit and dust at all times in this godforsaken land. He sweats constantly, and there is no relief from the blaze during the day, so they travel at night, the shifting sands making it harder than it should be. They reach the smaller village after a week, stopping often to rest because of the harsh terrain. There is nothing pushing them forward but his own desire, and it makes no sense to wear themselves out so quickly.

It is simple to find the establishment this time, and it is Haku who points out the ramshackle picture, little more than a stylized snake with hands rather than a dragon, painted on the corner of a house. The moon burns bright overhead when they enter, and it is a man

that greets them this time. A smuggler, by the looks of things. His head is mostly wrapped by cloth, but a scorpion carapace dangles from his ear, and there are snake fangs hung around his neck. Zabuza shows him the medallion, and this time the man examines it inside and out. He tests the metal, and stares long and hard at the designs before looking up at him.

"I had a bet that it would be Chūjitsuna Same that came first. Himiko is never going to let me hear the end of this," the man gripes, and Zabuza has no doubt in his mind who the Loyal Shark is. An ironic name, now.

"I'm sorry," interrupts Haku by his side, looking at Zabuza to see if he can continue speaking. Zabuza nods, because he is sure he can kill this man in seconds if need be.

"Who is that?" the boy asks, and the desert dweller blinks in surprise.

"You don't know about Chūjitsuna Same?" he asks, appalled, and Haku shakes his head. Zabuza stands firm, knowing enough to figure it out by context clues. "You know, Chūjitsuna Same, who worked with Odayaka Oni, and the Rakki Ryuu?"

Again, Haku shakes his head negative, and the man makes a startled face, looking up at Zabuza, then back down to the child. "I thought everybody knew this story-or, well, everybody I know. We don't tell it often, because of the risk it can be if shinobi overhear, but *you* of all people..." he says, but nothing changes the fact that neither of them have heard it told. It is a fact he is determined to rectify.

He motions for them to sit down and pulls food and water from a storage box, seemingly eager to please, and waits for for them to settle. "The tale changes a bit, from Suna to Kumo, regionalism and all that, so I'll boil it down to the barest bits for you," the man states, crossing his legs. He clears his throat once, and then begins his tale.

"Since the Sage of Six Paths gifted humankind the knowledge of how to control chakra, there has been a divide. Humanity separated itself into sects, and made things called borders and classes to define themselves. Namely, those that chose to wield chakra, and those that chose not too," he begins. "The gods saw this divide, and they watched it grow over time. They despaired over the division and isolation it caused, and the animosity that grew between them all. In their anguish, they sought to solve it, and in doing so, they created the Rakki Ryuu."

Zabuza withholds a grunt of amusement. *Hah*, the gods creating Ryuishi. That's a joke.

"They sent the dragon to the earth, where she would be most needed. In a brothel in the Mist, the Rakki Ryuu was gifted a human form, born the child of a lowly whore, and she loved the whole world. She was marked by the gods on her back, a symbol unlike any other.

"She grew in her form, and she knew the hardships of life. In her physical form, she hungered as we do, and hurt as we do. She struggled in a place that knew not of things such as love. It was cold and cruel, and the people suffered on its streets. There was no kindness to be found. The divisions were clear, as was the detriment they caused.

"Young and determined, the dragon began her divine mission to change that.

"She ventured onto the streets of her home, and she sought out the the seeds that she needed to grow. In an alley, she found an orphan flower child and her friends, abandoned and forsaken by the people. She taught them of love, and gave them gifts to help them in their hard life. She gave them the words they needed most.

" *You deserve to live, just because you are . And there is power in many different forms.*

"In them she nourished a seed and it grew into beautiful flowers, and she asked her flowers to nourish more in others like them. The dragon taught them for many years, until cold eyes saw the creation of the gods sent from the high plane of heaven. They saw her kindness, and they planned to stomp it out.

"They sent the treacherous Fugu, who brought his apprentice, Chūjitsuna Same, the boy whose loyalty never wavered. They were there to force her to leave her students. Fugu said if she could not defeat him, she would be forced in the dark, where she knew her love would turn into a bitter poison.

"She fought hard, but she lost. Yet, the Chūjitsuna Same saw her spirit, and he thought kindly of her. The Fugu was impressed despite his cruelty, and he saw value. He placed her not within the darkness, but sought to mold the dragon into something like himself. And so they made her go to a school where they taught those with small plants inside of them to strangle the life and love from their hearts. Here she would learn the taste of cruelty once more, and how terrible things can make a person grow.

"It was in this place she met the Odayaka Oni, a child who had been shaped by savagery his whole life. He knew only power and control, and the plant inside him was different, as all plants are. He grew without warmth, and she wished to change that. Though he lashed out again and again, she grew to care for him. The dragon taught him acceptance and friendship. In turn he taught her how to fight and battle. Though there was heartache, and troubles beyond measure, there was also forgiveness and companionship," the smuggler says.

Zabuza finds himself oddly... comforted, almost, by the story. It's strange to hear his life in such a mythical, foreign way, but it isn't unpleasant.

"War came to the land, and the Odayaka Oni and Rakki Ryuu were drafted into it despite their young age. The Chūjitsuna Same, older and higher ranking, found them both and they became a team. On the battlefields, she tasted loss, and she struggled in the bloodshed

and violence. They say that if the dragon had not been with Odayaka Oni and Chūjitsuna Same, she would have lost herself. They helped her not lose the love that made her unique, and reminded her everyday that there was good things left in the world.

"Her team became precious people to her, and she loved them.

"On break from the war, Rakki Ryuū returned to her village. The time had come, and she saw that the plants she had nourished inside the children had grown into a garden, and she smiled at the sight. She was changed from the war, because even the divine changes, and she was determined that the world needed changing too.

"Yet the sorrow was great, because she knew that she could not take her team with her. They knew not her divine mission, and they would not understand. To part with them forever was too much to bear, so she gave them gifts so that they may always find their way back to her, should they so choose. For if they chose to return, she knew that their bonds would be stronger because it was a choice freely made.

"To Odayaka Oni she gave a bright bronze and gold medallion with their figures carved onto it, the Sword, the Shark, and the Ningyo, all wrapped in chains that bound the three like the red ribbons of fate.

"To Chūjitsuna Same, she left a necklace made of many silver pieces woven together, stronger because it was made from more than one string, hung with an opal as blue as the ocean to remind him of the depths of her affections."

He knew it, he knew that girly necklace came from Ryuishi! Kisame never said a word about it, and Zabuza accepted its existence like Kisame accepted the medallion, but he knew he wasn't the only one given a compass to find her. They were her unit, and they would always be strongest together. Obviously, she knew it too.

"The Rakki Ryuū ventured forth, and she looked out to the children and the downtrodden people of her home and she said to them: *I am*

happy for you, but these walls can longer hold us. If you choose, break them down, and set yourself free. Let everyone know my words, and grow gardens of your own.

"And so the children she had nourished cheered and went to clear the way. They fought to show the world that strength came in all forms, and they were not weaker for the life that they lived. They fought, and the Rakki Ryuu was happy to see her children set free, but she wept for the loss of her team. Her cause was divine, though, and there was still so many divides to overcome, and she had to set the balance. Both ninja and civilian, lowborn and divine, she strives to spread her divine knowledge.

"To this day she works for her people and her cause, but she waits for her team to find her," the man finishes hoarsely, reaching for his water.

Zabuza sits silently, caught between gruff laughter and bewilderment. It is a stupid fairy-tale, but it holds grains of truth. How in the world did she get people to listen to this? Was it even her who first told this story, or was it an overzealous person who followed her?

(Somewhere, Hanako sneezes.)

Unfortunately, Haku is wearing *that face* again and looking at him like a love-struck teenager, even though he's eleven and not quite to puberty yet. He's got those big eyes behind his mask, and Zabuza always feels uncomfortable under this sort of stare.

"Stop that," he bites out, but Haku doesn't stop that. He doesn't stop that for years.

The man in the desert directs them to a larger encampment in the mountains of Kumo, and the nin rest for two days to stock up on supplies before heading out once more.

The trail of information leads them up into the high mountains of the Land of Lightning, where a city has carved itself out from the stone. The air is thin, and the terrain is harsh, but he would prefer this environment a thousand times over the desert again.

The brothel is one of the largest structures in the city, poking out from the mountain side with a rich sort of elegance that shouts decadence, and it is clear to Zabuza that the establishment holds more riches than a city like this could provide.

"Zabuza-sama," whispers Haku next to him, raising his hand to point. "Look."

He does, and what he sees is shocking. There, guarding the door in a sultry dress, is someone who bears a striking resemblance to the boy at his side. A Yuki woman, part of the lost clans of Kirigakure.

He grunts, amused, capturing the woman's attention, because of *course* she did. Of course the women and children of the noble clans didn't just run. Of course his teammate stole not only civilians, but Kekkei Genkai users as well. How else would she provide strength for her people?

The boy beside him cannot stop gawking once they are invited inside, his head turning this way and that. Around them are not only regular working girls, but numerous clan members from the Noble Three of Kirigakure. The brothel is less of a whorehouse at this point, and more of a fortress with the number of fighters within.

They are brought to the top, a large room with one wall completely made of windows, and there Zabuza spots a familiar face sitting at a tea table, steely eyes scanning over him.

"Kagami," he rumbles, recognizing the stern Okiya matron who once owned his teammate. Her hair is greyer than it once was, and there are more wrinkles on her face, but she is healthier than she was in the Mist. There is dignity in her posture, and cold satisfaction in her gaze.

"It took you long enough," she tells him. "Finally ready to join the adults then, Momochi-san?"

He wordlessly settles himself down like he owns the place, Kubikiribōchō strapped firmly to his back, Haku by his side.

"If it wasn't for her orders, I would send you away," the older woman informs him. "She doesn't need a faithless partner who made her wait eight years to come waltzing back like nothing has changed. That girl has been through too much already."

"I said I would find her," he growls, because he did. He promised it, and not even this hag can stand in his way. He has strength enough to claim her as his own.

"You aren't kids anymore. This isn't about some oath made years ago by children, this is larger than you could believe, *boy*. While you spent your time playing loyal shinobi, she's been building an empire, and she is so far above you it isn't even funny. *She doesn't need you*," spits the woman, her gaze firm and judgmental.

For a second, Zabuza feels doubt. He has traveled all over in his search for his best tool, and her influence on the land is obvious. People have been singing her praises, and he has seen with his own eyes the thing she has created, far larger than a single shinobi—even a Swordsman of the Mist.

And during his search for his best tool, he has realized something: she isn't a tool anymore. She's a wielder, a person, and Zabuza has never been good with people.

"The unit is always stronger together," he says, and it is half for her and half for himself.

She scowls and taps her perfectly manicured hand against the surface of the wooden table. "So it is, and if she ever found out I turned you away, my life would be forfeit. I will give you the coordinates of her new home, but know this: unit or not, if you betray

her, lose her faith, or endanger us in any way, I will be the least of your worries," she hisses. "She has made allies with strength beyond measure, and a whole unseen nation will be out for your blood. There will be no crevice you can hide in from your fate, should you abuse her affections."

He ignores the threat, but slots the information away inside his head. They are faithful to her, even when she is not there to ensure it.

"Where?" he asks, and he finally gets his answer.

Zabuza finds the house on the coast of Wind Country, where the terrain has yet to turn into stone and sand, and the green of River still spreads out. The mangrove swamp that encloses it from the continental side is a treacherous mire full of tangled growth and harmful wildlife. Ignoring the venomous snakes and frogs, there is also a plethora of crocodiles that patrol during high tide, and tiny biting insects of all sizes. To the north, a capricious cliff juts out, hundreds of feet tall, formed from sharp stone worn down by wind and wave.

Nestled near the treeline the home she has chosen sits isolated, bordered by nature for leagues in every direction, and he smiles to see the long stretch of shining sand around them.

We'll meet down at that beach in the south one day, right? her words echo in his memory.

Pride fills him as he steps closer, and he can examine the large dwelling with salt-encrusted wooden paneling. He looks through the huge windows, and he can smell her before he even opens the door. That floral, saltwater scent that belongs to her alone permeates the area around the dwelling.

He doesn't knock when he opens the door, because he has never knocked on her door before. They have always shared rooms and homes, and that will never change.

Inside is pleasantly cool, and he can see her hand in every inch of space, from the dark hardwood floors, to the comfortably worn furniture. The dining room is the first room beside the entrance, followed by a large kitchen with a bar between the two. A laundry room sits behind the kitchen, and a hall decorated with drawings of people he does not know leads down into two bedrooms, a small bathroom, the den, and a set of stairs. When he climbs them, he knows without a doubt that the only bedroom on the upper level is hers.

It's open and airy, and clean in the same way she always kept everything. The biggest bed he has ever seen sits inside, fitted with sheets that feel obnoxiously soft between his fingers, and the nightstand beside it catches his eyes. There, propped up against a lamp, is their unit, the three of them side by side, grouped together for the camera. Beside it stands Kisame's jounin registration photo, and his own. He feels something loosen inside his chest, because the unit is always stronger together, and she knows that. She always knew it.

"Haku!" he barks, and his voice echoes through the empty house. "Pick a room. We stay here."

The house is devoid of life, but he does not mind, because he knows she will come back. This is her home, and she made it for them.

Zabuza and Haku settle in their new abode easily. This house was obviously made for comfort and care, because the freezer is stocked with familiar-tasting meals that they gorge themselves on, and the den is basically one large pillow nest. The furniture is big enough to sit even Zabuza's large frame, and Haku delights in running around on the beach like he's never seen sand in his life.

Each day that passes, Zabuza feels the anticipation grow inside him, and he's restless with it. His teammate has done so much, and it make him feel unsettled. She's become a legend and built up a power base to rival a nation. She's obtained a house that every

street urchin and akasenko would kill for, and built a life that inspires envy and insecurity in his heart. She's left the Mist so far behind her it is little more than a dream, and all she has left to remember it are the photographs by the bed.

On the evening of the fifth day, it comes to a head. He's in the dining room, while Haku sharpens his senbon in his room, when he hears the doorknob turn. No footsteps in the sand or stomping across the porch to warn him, only the faint squeak of metal inside wood.

(He will never tell a soul alive that his heart thudded like lead in his chest, or that his stomach leapt into his throat as that door cracked open. He will also never admit that he almost laughs when he hears her voice for the first time in so long.)

"Who in the absolute fuck thinks..." comes a husky tone, familiar but not. It's roughness is now almost sultry, and-

-and the door swings open, and he can't breathe.

There is no scrawny, short, little girl standing in front of him. There are no wide eyes or doll-like features on her anymore, and she certainly can't pass for an effeminate male any longer.

Sharp, wickedly shaped coal eyes widened in shock are set on a shapely face framed by long, dark hair. Full, plum-colored lips hang open, halfway through a colorful curse. Strong muscles, butterscotch skin littered with scars, and *curves that were not there before*. She has breasts now, and hips. He knew that she would be older, but somehow he didn't quite equate growing up with growing a figure.

There is no child here anymore. No ghost from the past, but a living, breathing person, with strength in her form and life in her eyes. She isn't broken pieces, but parts put together, more than what she once was. She's grown into something he can't name, and for a moment he forgets to breath in.

Watanabe Ryuishi stares at him, and for a moment he sees something like confusion on her face, but it is rapidly replaced by dawning recognition and awe.

"Zabuza," she whispers, dropping her bag, and then her new look ceases to matter, because *this is her*. This is the the girl that guarded his back in every battle, and fed him meals every day. She laughed with him, and played with his hair, and they grew together. This is the one he worked years for, to be strong enough to stand by her side.

"I found you," he says, remembering how to breath. A strangled noise leaves her throat at the sound of his voice.

Then she is launching herself at him with speeds he never could have predicted, darting across the space between them like a lightning bolt. He laughs as she barrels into him with so much force it knocks him onto his back, and they both go skidding across the floor.

"Zabuza, Zabuza, *Zabuza*," she chants, and yes, she certainly is crying, because *he's here* and she can't think because *he came back*, and oh god, she loves him more than words can ever express. Her heart swells inside her chest until it feels like it's going to burst, and she has never felt such relief, such pure, unfiltered joy. It rushes through her veins like a drug, and she feels like the first person who ever discovered fireworks, or the first child to ever eat sugar. Zabuza didn't abandon her, and she isn't alone. Her hope was not wasted, and it didn't turn into a knife to stab her. It was real, it exists, and *he is here* .

"Ryuishi," he bites back, the air knocked out of his lungs, and she can't stop laughing and crying, because he's so big now, so much taller and broader. But he's still as pale as the moon, his hair is still a mess, and he still smells like weapons oil and steel. He smells like childhood memories and safety.

She pins him to the ground, her legs straddled around his waist, and she runs her hands over him just to make sure he is real. To make sure that this stupid, idiotic, sweet, beautiful monster who hates

shirts and always wears his stupid mask is not a hallucination. She needs to know it he isn't a genjutsu, or a mental break. She needs to feel the person he is, the reality; every dirty pore and toned muscle, every fire under his skin.

"You prick," she chokes out, a smile stretching across her face so wide it hurts. "You dirtbag- *oh god you're here* -"

He says nothing, only tangling his hand in her hair to grip her head, and dear Kali, they're so big now. His hands are ridiculous in size, and she can feel his fingers threading into her locks, cradling her head. He could kill her and she wouldn't even care, because he's here. He's back, and there is a Zabuza-shaped hole in her heart that is finally being filled again.

"-You asshole, with your giant s-sword and freakishly tall height and your s-stupid f-fucking face," she whispers, hunching over to press their foreheads together. He feels so warm against her, a fire that could never be replaced. They fit together, and it feels right, like birds in the sky or fish in the sea. They belong.

Never mind that she waited years, and never mind that she's tired. He came for her knowing everything she was capable of. He knew the darkness inside her heart and the crimes she is guilty of. He chose her, he chose to come back. He accepts her, and it means the world, because he had no reason to other that *she meant something to him* .

"Always crying," he murmurs, and he wishes he was better at this, better with words and people and things. But she laughs again as her vision blurs with tears that threaten to drip on him, and he knows that it's alright, that she never wanted anything but what he was. His thumb sweeps under her eyes and wipes them away.

"You're home," she tells him breathlessly. "You stupid fuck, *you're home* ."

"I'm home," he repeats, and there is warmth inside his rib-cage that melts into his bones, because it's better this way. A tool doesn't make him feel like this, no, a person does. The person he grew with, the person he struggled with, the person he fought for.

They rest there on the floor, foreheads pressed together, holding each other like they will never let go again, because for the first time in years, they feel something empty be filled, a missing piece put back in.

For the first time since forever, they feel almost whole again.

Maybe... maybe it has taken him twenty-one years, a shinobi war, a civil war, two massacres, the loss of his brother, and the loss of his best tool, for him to find something else.

AN: Everybody go thank my beta Enbi who told me to post this and not leave you hanging. So we get to see Kiri, and mei, and we get to see Momochi 'let me jump into your life and I expect you to accept me' Zabuza. Most of this is pretty self explanatory, but if it bothers you, message me. I hope everyone can see how Zabuza grew as a person himself. Haku comes in... the majority of the next chapter. Speaking of, the chapters will jump because there is so much to cover before the skip. The chapter after the next is like, a huge ball of 'So this is what happened.'

I also hoped to show that as much as Ryuishi's focus was on her boys, Zabuza's focus was on her as well. They helped shape each other, even from a distance.

A thank you and hug to my favoriters, followers, and my lurkers. A huge, gigantic parade for all my reviewers. I may not reply, but your reviews FEED ME LIFE.

Much love for Enbi, who not only edited this early, but told me not to leave you hanging. Best Beta Enbi 2k15. All thanks

belong to her.

Question: How do you think Team Seven, plus Sensei, will react to finding out who Ryuishi is, if that happens? OR How does Kisame react to the new Zabuza joined up with Ryuishi, if he ever finds out? OR What the fuck is the Akatsuki going to do about The Rakki Ryu?

Meeting the New and Old

I do not own Naruto. TW for handling mental health poorly, gore, PTSD, and

Haku throws himself out of his claimed room and into the hallway the moment he hears a loud thump echo through the strange house, going so fast that he actually slides a bit as he turns to face the kitchen.

What he sees in that moment halts his charge to defend his master, because even though he has never seen the scarred woman before, his master doesn't look particularly upset about the fact that she pinning him to the floor. Actually, Haku has never seen that expression on the man's face before, focused and tender. Never has he witnessed his stoic and gruff master hold somebody quite so close, foreheads pressed together as they whisper to each other. He thinks it is strange, and it makes him feel strange, and perhaps he should not be watching this.

Haku is a child, not an idiot. He knows enough to know that whatever is happening between the two is private.

(It doesn't stop him from checking in every now and then, peeking out through his cracked open door, just to be sure.)

At some point, when the sun fades, the adults aren't on the floor anymore, but Haku does not panic. He has faith in his master, and he knows that he wouldn't have left. The boy gets himself ready for bed without prompting, having done it many times before. When he lies on the mattress, he wonders about this strange journey they have taken, and how much has changed in so little time.

Three months ago, he was posing as Master Zabuza's servant. He slept on the ground and he ate the cold, tasteless gruel he was

served. He dressed in whatever Zabuza-sama could get him, and he had barely crossed the borders of Water Country.

Now he is Haku, and he isn't the last of his clan. He's lying on a mattress that is firm and at the same time yielding, tucked beneath blankets so thick he could suffocate in them, in a house grander than he could ever dream of. The frozen food is rich and spicy, and he's dressed in the pilfered stash of hunter-nin garb acquired to fit his form. He's traveled for months across wondrous terrains, searching for the girl that gave his master the medallion that hung from his sword.

The Rakki Ryuu, he thinks, and the image of the tanned, dark-haired woman crying and cupping his master's face gently in her hand appears in his mind.

His heart pumps in his chest, and in the darkness of the room, he thinks of the strange smuggler from wind country, and his story. He thinks of the gold-bronze medallion that has always hung from his master's sword, inlaid with images he now understands.

Master Zabuza had a precious person who held him in the same regard. She left him a way to come back to her, and Master Zabuza brought him with. He was not forgotten. He was fed, and cared for, and he wasn't alone. He was precious too.

He closes his eyes in the dark room and quiets his thoughts. The smell of seawater and citronella fills his nose, and he feels the weight of his flavorful meal press against his stomach, filling and warm.

Calmer than before, Haku drifts off to sleep. He dreams of water so still it looks like a mirror, reflecting his image back at him. Around him heavy fog obscures the terrain, but it is not thick enough to hide his master from view, standing proudly behind him. The strange woman from earlier stands beside him as well, and if one squints, they look like a family.

Hours later, he he startles awake to a warbling screech so loud it echoes through the house.

Haku's eyes snap open and he lurches for his senbon, only to realize that he isn't anywhere near his senbon, and also that the bed is not made for lurching. He tumbles off out of it and slams into the floor, grunting as his face makes a solid connection with the hardwood panels.

The screech turns into shouting, and Haku's heart beats hard in his chest when he hears the familiar sound of something solid hitting a wall, and a heavy thud on the floor above him.

"TELL ME WHO-" his master roars.

He scrambles up half asleep, searching for his senbon, which have somehow ended up on top of shelf on the other side of the room. In one swift movement he snatches them up, and scampers out of his room once more. He throws himself down the hall, across the den, and up the stairs, following his instinct to be by his master's side, weapons ready.

"Just a scar-" comes the woman's voice.

He throws opens the door, and the two combatants pause in their positions, eyes whipping around to look at the newcomer.

"Who...?" the woman asks, her foot planted against Zabuza-sama's chest, an arm pressing his bulk away from her, half tangled in the sheets of the biggest bed Haku has ever seen.

"Haku," greets Zabuza, crouched over the woman, one hand steadying himself on the bed, the other gripped tight around her wrist, stopping the fist inches away from his face.

" *There was a child here this whole time and you didn't tell me,*" hisses the woman fiercely, her long hair splayed around them.

Of course she already knew Haku and Zabuza were going to be a team, or at least she heavily suspected it, but there wasn't anybody around but her and Zabuza last night, so she thought his presence might have changed things.

Who the fuck is she kidding? She wasn't even thinking about the apprentice, she was too busy being blissfully out of her skull with joy, because *Zabuza is back*. He is back, and though they didn't talk much, due to the crying and whatnot, things were finally looking up. Hell, she was giddy even as she went to bed, practically glued to the smug bastard like they were children again. For once her humongous mattress didn't feel empty and too cold, but rather just missing one more person, and comfortably warm. She slept like an emotionally exhausted fucking baby after that bawl fest, wrapped around him like a snake around a mouse.

... Only to wake up to Zabuza's terrifying morning face as he, apparently, inspected her in her sleep like a creep. He seemed none too happy with some of the scars she had accumulated in their time apart, especially Orochimaru's little gift to her.

Like any reasonable kunoichi, she had warbled out her best war screech and went to attack. He was in the middle of demanding names when they were interrupted by sparkly shoujo eyes McCute face, otherwise known as Haku.

"He's adorable," she sighs, and Zabuza practically attempts to crush her. He's not so heavy, and she's more than enjoying this, because hot damn has she missed his overly aggressive mother henning. She missed his everything.

"Tell me their names," he bites out, and she lifts her free foot to kick the inside of his elbow, causing him to drop her hand while he snarls and latches onto her ankle in retaliation. She uses her free arm to wave.

"Hey there buddy," she coos, her eyes glued to the boy, "My name is Ryuishi, and I've known Zabuza since he was littler than you."

At this the boy looks between them once more, closer, and Ryuishi can't help but melt as she uses her free leg and hips to throw Zabuza's weight off her and awkwardly switch positions with him. Both arms now free, she sits up straight and tries to look like a respectable person who isn't sitting on top of another human being *who won't let go of her ankle* -

"I thought you were Rakki Ryuu," the boy chimes, and she aims an accusatory glance at Zabuza, who is looking apoplectic as he takes in the numerous stripes and mars on her flesh. Honestly, it makes her feel warm to see him so protective, but also self conscious about the scars. True, he didn't notice until morning, so maybe it wasn't so bad. Most didn't actually pucker or anything, and her skin was still smooth, but had she gotten so many since she had been alone?

She follows the stoic man's gaze to her hands, where the tell tale spider-webbing of lightning jutsu shows faintly on her palms, ever so light and faded with time. Man, she was really stupid playing with Hatake like that, but at least he was the biggest bitch in the end, and not her.

"Ahaha... I go by a lot of names, but you can call me Ryuishi," she says, turning back to him with a smile, ignoring Zabuza's creepiness. It's refreshing to know that it still remains a part of him, just like his hatred for shirts.

"It's nice to meet you, Ryuishi-sama," the boy greets with a bow, and good *lord* he's adorable. Straight up beautiful even, with his cute little face and slender arms. He has lashes that are ridiculously long, framing gorgeous dark eyes, and smooth pale skin.

If Ryuishi was guessing from a distance, she would have called him a girl, but hell, if he says he's a boy, than he's a boy. Ryuishi does not give a single shit otherwise, because he would know best about himself, not her.

She looks down to Zabuza, who has been listening to the conversation with his typical 'no fucks given' face. The expression is

still recognizable, even if he has somehow managed to obtain a strong jaw and sculpted features alongside his height and musculature.

"How did someone like you get your hands on such a polite and well-mannered child?" she asks rhetorically, but Haku seems to take this as a serious question, because he looks a bit defensive.

"Zabuza-sama raised me," he informs her gravely. "I am his tool."

She snorts, and smacks Zabuza on his chest hard enough to leave a red handprint. She smiles when he doesn't even wince, because it feels good to know that she doesn't have to hold back on someone, it's freeing, and she can't stop, he's back, *he came back* -

"He use to call me that too," she tells the boy softly. "But I think we're more than that, and Zabuza just doesn't know how to communicate because he's still an emotionally constipated-AAAH!"

Zabuza takes her distraction as an opening, and pins her belly down on the bed, her face smashed into the mattress as he examines her back. It takes him a moment, but his eyes settle on his own scar, peeking out from the top of her sleeping shorts, and crawling down her leg. She still bears his mark from their graduation, and that satisfies him in some small way.

"Breakfast," he orders, and though she flails and calls him names, something warm still sits inside her chest.

She knows that they aren't whole, that they have wounds inside their souls, and that there is still a missing piece in the shape of a blue-skinned man with a smile full of knives. Somehow, though, it seems less intimidating. Zabuza is here, and he came back knowing how bad she could get. He accepted her just like she accepted him. No ulterior motives, no false hopes, no fantasy, he chose her.

"Bastard," she calls softly, and she can't help the smile that stretches across her face, the smile that hasn't left her face since he came

back.

He doesn't answer, but when she twists around the edges of his lips are turned up as well, and there is something inside his chestnut eyes she can't name, but she feels it as well. Even pinned here, wrestling like children again, she feels her heart fill up inside her chest. Even if he's still dumb and possessive, he's here. There is no settling in, there is no stretching out feelers and no finding his place. Zabuza is Zabuza and he sets his terms, just as she makes her own, and those terms include each other.

Then she slips out from beneath him, pulling herself backwards, and pushes his face into the bed before she scampers over to the young child, feeling bubbly and giddy inside.

The boy look up to her, and his emotions are painfully easy to read. Determination, respect, and hope mingle on his face.

She doesn't even hesitate to reach out and grab the eleven-year-old's hand. "Well, Haku..." she starts. "You want to help me make breakfast?"

He looks over to their joined palms, and then over to Zabuza, who sits up and watches them both with an appraising gaze.

"I don't know how," he tells her.

She makes a flippant gesture with her free hand, as if to wave it off. It's not like she expected him to do much more than stir for now. "That's no problem, I can teach you."

His small hand settles in hers, and she feels his fingers grasp on. Nervous tension leaks out of his frame, and he smiles hesitantly back at her. "I'd like that," he says, and she's sold.

She can totally, absolutely, one hundred percent get behind this as the new normal.

There are things that Ryuishi never really accounted for in all her rose-colored, happy-go-lucky visions for the future. Important things, things that she should have known would occur, but really didn't think too hard about.

Being who she is, she considered many, many variables before hand. She plotted out projections and statistics based on the information and logistics she was able to gather. Well, as much as anyone was able to really project anything when considering the fact that a ninja-based civilization relied on subterfuge, misinformation, misdirection, and confusing rhetoric.

She accounted for landmass, travel times, trade routes, local economies, environment, resources, manpower, drive, willingness to work, ability to work, local religion, culture, education levels, available technology, industry, construction, individual philosophies, competitors, personal viewpoints, emotional response, loyalty, factions, crime rates, propensity for mishandling, greed, historical viewpoints, and origins.

Hell, she considered shit on all sorts of scales. From the individual citizen to the the Elemental Countries themselves as a whole. She thought about how the civilizations were created through the Era of the Warring Clans, with tons of fighting amongst tribes and settlements before they were united in a way that reminded her of the great Mongolian hordes and Khans of her old world. She took into account the individual countries themselves, and their different mottos. Then cities, then villages, then people themselves, who tended to be a strange mix of Shinto-Buddhists with Japanese traditions, random eastern traditions and influences, who leaned toward a Shogunate-like understanding of society.

She considered how to best introduce her ideas and philosophies, and settled for some strange mix that borrowed ideas not only from the Meiji Restoration, but the spread of Buddhism, and the Industrialization of Germany. She saw the rampant nationalism and ridiculous separatist ideas that reminded her of both World War One, and the Era of Colonization in the 1600's. She compared ideas and

events from her old world and she saw them played out again and again in this new one. It was eerie how much human nature decided to shine through at times, and also how thousands of years of human history in her old world really helped her adapt and anticipate the events that could occur in this new one.

Ryuishi spent an inordinate time planning out how to deal with changes and set things into motion in this strange new world that she lived in. She had schemes and back up plans coming out of her ass after years of research and study. At this point she had plans for motherfucking Zetsu deciding maritime warfare was the way to go, or Iwa somehow gaining the ability to run aerial raids. She could spend hours just going over the facts, plotting out possible paths and systems that maybe, perhaps, might kinda work.

Sweet Kel, she had her fingers in so many pies she could run a damn bakery at this point, and she had enough irons in the fire to build a fucking fence around all of Wind Country. Still, she knew that she was missing variables, and nothing went according to plan.

That being said, Ryuishi had left out a huge detail when considering the future: namely, herself.

The missing-nin had considered the depths of human nature, and the heights it could reach as well. She struggled to understand everything in order to know how to best manipulate situations around to benefit herself and her people. Most of the time, she failed at grasping these higher concepts. She did not, however, really notice how much she had changed as a person, and the absolutely depraved things she, apparently, did to further her cause. She knew she wasn't a saint, but it never really occurred to her how far she had strayed from normal until she was confronted by Zabuza and Haku.

When fucking *Zabuza* calls you out on a character flaw, you know you're fucked.

"Orochimaru," he grunts, and she lifts her head up from painting her nails and looks around the house. No, there's no Orochimaru in her

house, or anywhere near it actually. Just the three of them.

She turns back to him and quirks a brow. "What?" she asks.

"Orochimaru," he states in his gravelly, weirdly deep voice. It's crazy, but she keeps expecting his pre-pubescent voice to come out of his grown-ass man body. "You've been working with him."

She squints her eyes in confusion, and looks off to the side. There's something here she's not picking up fully. She gave Zabuza a brief (four day) rundown on what she did, sort of, maybe, and taken in his story as well. Where was this coming from?

"Yeeeeeeees?" she states, drawing the word out.

"He cut your throat," he states.

She lowers her gaze and finishes the clear coat on her middle finger, focusing on not getting the polish on her skin. It's strengthening serum, and it doesn't crack or chip.

"He also took biological samples, and ran me through a couple tests over the years, and trained me," she answers bluntly, trying to figure out what she's missing in his tone.

"You mean experimentation," comments Haku from the other side of the den, where he is devouring a book on medicinal herbs she got from a Yuki woman near the Kumo border. She doesn't really know anything about it, but books and scrolls are valuable as fuck, and she could have read it one day. Maybe. When she had the time.

"I guess you could call it that," she answers. They were pretty much catered to her needs and abilities, and therefore had not been used before. His psychology certainly was experimental in nature, and she did not enjoy his first attempts at psychotropic medications. She doesn't know why he thought trace amounts of hallucinogens was a good idea, but he did for some reason. She hadn't been on such a horrible trip since long before she was born in this world.

"How long?" grunts Zabuza, but she's busy attempting to recall some other of Orochimaru's hilariously weird and fucked up tests for her. The isolation techniques were horrid and not at all fun, and the physical demands were out of this world. She can't count how many times he broke her bones or dislocated her joints in order for her to get better.

"Hmmm?" she queries.

He fixes his eyes on her, and she can feel the faintest amounts of his chakra radiating from him.

"How long have you worked together?" he asks, and she hesitates, running over possible half-truths and acceptable answers.

"Don't lie," he orders, in that no-nonsense way that he has, like he will know exactly if she lies. Like he will accept nothing less than complete cooperation.

"I... do you remember our first mission in the war?" she asks. "Where were we stationed in that tiny town near the border, and I got hit with a kunai while we patrolled?"

He nods, and she sighs because good *lord*, telling the truth is hard. It's really, really hard. It's like there's a lump in her throat and she suddenly feels ashamed, because she realizes she's never been straight with her unit before. In fact, she's never come clean with anybody but the Snake Sannin, ever.

"I made contact with him then," she admits, and her throat feels dry. Oh god he's going to hate her, he's going to leave, *she's going to be all alone again* -

He grunts, and then settles back down to sharpen his kunai. She watches and waits, on edge because now he's made her think about it. Fuck. Shit. Why did she choose Orochimaru? He kinda treated her shittily, but he treated everyone shittily. It was shit with a purpose though, beside just general dickery. Orochimaru wasn't just

experimenting on her without a cause, he was documenting exactly how fucked up her brain was and trying to find ways to make it work again. He didn't break her bones for fun, it was just a side effect of the training, and he always had them healed afterward. He dislocated her joints to teach her his own insane taijutsu style that was dependent on her being able to pop those suckers out of place and shift them back in.

Still, he's admittedly a horrible person. She was what, eleven to thirteen, physically speaking? Not to mention a freshly made veteran of the front lines in the throes of a crippling mental breakdown.

He's not as bad as he could be, though. In canon, he did the shoddiest experiments ever and basically was a mad man. After she called his work into question, he had changed. Consent garnered better results, and the introduction of what she knew to be double blind studies changed his ways completely. He spent more time studying variables that he hadn't before and collected more reliable data before progressing. It was actual science instead of random experimentation.

While he did conduct experiments on children, he at least went through huge amounts of procedures that weren't there before. He did do some non-consensual experimentation, but he at least kept it to combatants and adults, and with the people willing to assist him, he didn't really do that many forced tests anymore.

That wasn't great, but it was better, right?

Oh fucking shit butt dick balls on a rancid wagon made from rotted meat, what couldn't she justify to herself?

"Zabuza," she rasps, dropping the nail polish on the table and cradling her head in her hands. "What have you done?"

He looks up from his utter focus on the kunai to look at her, eyes focused on nothing, freshly painted nails tangled in her hair. He squints his eyes, attempting to get a read on what kind of event is

happening now. Nothing has really stayed the same over the years, and he finds that he doesn't really care. Ryuishi is Ryuishi, only she's not, and that makes sense to him. He's alright with it.

Nobody ever said that Momochi Zabuza had a firm grasp of his own mind, or an introspective bone in his body. If they did, then they are liars.

Haku, on the other hand, seems to have a vast amount of empathy, and he frowns when he look up to witness the strange woman's turmoil. He isn't quite sure what's happening with her yet, but Zabuza-sama seems to like her very much, and that's a good enough reason for Haku to accept her. She also seems to like Zabuza-sama, which is another point that Haku can agree with.

"Ryuishi-sama?" Haku asks gently. "What's wrong?"

"I don't understand the logic of morality," she whispers. "Oh god, why do I do what I do, and why is it any better than what other people do?"

Haku scrunches up his face as the woman plants her head on her knees and let out a low, thrumming whine from deep in her throat. Zabuza looks up, and his feature twist into a look of pure confusion.

It's like the beginning of some horrible joke. Three shinobi from Kirigakure sit inside her living room and attempt to wrap their minds around what, exactly, morals are.

The worst part is that she has absolutely no clue, and she has no idea how to figure it out. Literally the only rule she has in her book is 'Don't kill between ages 0-12. Nonlethal takedown only' and even that has a little asterisk near it, because it comes with fine print. Like, no she won't kill children, unless a child's life is the only thing she has to bargain with for the safety of her people, as was the case with Itachi. Probably, maybe? She doesn't know.

She doesn't want to torture them, or use them, or have them living the life they are now, but she can't exactly operate on the bases that everybody else does. She has faced teenagers on the battlefield, she has killed them in the war, and she will have to face them again. Every village uses children in some shape or form as ninja. She thought she was above that, but Haku is here, and she's been socializing with Naruto and Gaara, and oh fucking fuckity fuck fuck, she just doesn't know.

"What does morality mean?" Haku asks.

"I don't know," she whispers desperately.

"A set of behaviors or beliefs concerning what is acceptable to do," says Zabuza, and it's a textbook definition, sheer memorization repeated blithely and without emotion.

"So what you won't do, because it is bad?" asks Haku, and Zabuza nods, while Ryuishi spirals into an existential crisis.

"But what is bad?" Ryuishi questions, lost and unseeing.

"Stop that," Zabuza orders, and she reels with the weight of her thoughts. So many questions swirl around her mind. Is she doing anything at all? Does it matter? Is she changing the status quo, or is she feeding her own power base? What right does she have?

"For that matter what is good? Am I bad because there were children involved in the burning of Kiri? Or is it acceptable because I was physically four when I recruited them, and they were a few years older?"

Zabuza slides the kunai half sharpened into his leg pouch and stands smoothly from his seated position. He understands more than he did before, because going by her ramblings, she started this when she was four, before he even met her, and had been amassing power for years before war even broke out. Where he was a prodigy with a blade, she was a prodigy in intelligence.

He takes a moment to attempt to imagine Kisame's face if he find out that none of this was as personal as he made it, then shrugs it away. It will be what it will be.

"For that matter, am I responsible for Orochimaru's work because I don't fight harder against it? Without him my own influence would crumble, but without me his would do the same, so should I-"

Zabuza takes five quick steps across the room, grabs her hair near her scalp, avoiding the barbed wire, and *yanks* . She grunts as her head is pulled back, her face forcibly turned to look upward at Zabuza who towers over her.

"Stop that," he demands, and she blinks.

"But-" she tries, but he shakes her head a little bit, using his grip on her head like reins on a horse.

"Don't care," he tells her, and if it is a statement on how he feels, or how she should feel, she does not know. Whatever it is, though, he's right. She can think circles around the basic morality and ethical connotations of her actions, but it won't change what she has done, or what she will do.

"I'm sorry," she says suddenly. Sorry she doesn't get it. Sorry she doesn't make sense, sorry she made a gross character in her head to fit rose-tinted memories of Zabuza. Zabuza isn't an idea, he's a person. Zabuza shouldn't be boxed in by her wants or expectations, Zabuza should be Zabuza, it's what she loves about him.

He doesn't answer.

"I'm sorry I deceived you for years in our childhood and never told you about anything, or blatantly lied."

He lets go of her hair then, and shrugs, because he honestly doesn't really care. It wasn't about her lies, it was about her guarding him

and him guarding her. It's not what she said, it's what she did. They worked together, that's what mattered.

"You think too much," he says, and she laughs lightly and maybe a little unhinged, but hey, they're both missing-nin from Kiri, what does stability matter to them?

So what if everything is complicated beyond measure? Maybe she just needs to simplify things a bit.

There are things the two of them don't talk about. She could write an entire book on the reasons why, a fucking bulleted list with sub-points on security and an entire half on mental health. But what it really boils down to is that the both of them are shit with emotions, and wouldn't know a healthy relationship if it bit them in the face and tried to claw out their throat with its hands. That's what Kisame was for. Kisame knew about expressing emotions and the expectations of normal friends and teammates. He knows the ideas and theories on what is healthy.

Ryuishi and Zabuzza, though, they know how to repress emotions and how to distract themselves. They know how to keep moving even when tied down.

... So they don't talk about some things.

Things like the Third Shinobi War. They don't talk about what they did to survive. They don't speak about the platoons of soldiers that fell before the three of them, or what it was to be a pack of feral children running around the front lines like demons out of hell. Ryuishi doesn't say anything about the constant, linger fear she always felt, or how she is only just beginning to be able to hear explosions without flashbacks. She doesn't ask if he remembers how it felt to be soaked in blood to the point that the clothes stuck onto their bodies, and the stickiness of it gummed up her hands and dried off in powdery, brownish flakes. She doesn't say anything about the iron tang flooding her mouth when she used her mouth to tear pieces

of flesh off of an enemy, or the slick, slimy feel of human meat in her mouth, little strands of muscle and tendon caught between her teeth.

Zabuza doesn't say anything about the night that Iwa ninja found them when they slept, and they awoke to burning white phosphorus eating away at their skin, burning so hot it seared right through his nerves until he only felt numb. He doesn't mention the constant, aggressive need to check up on his team, because all around them were mangled corpses torn apart so badly they could have been anyone, including Ryuishi or Kisame. He doesn't mention the fear of losing the unit because he wasn't strong enough, wasn't fast enough, wasn't good enough to protect what he had claimed. He doesn't breathe a word about the feeling of sliding a blade, sharp as a razor, into skin, between ribs, into organs, or the warmth of blood pouring over the hilt of his sword onto his hands.

They don't talk about the massacre at the Academy, when Zabuza mercilessly slaughtered their classmates and upperclassmen without care, or the night that Kiri was burned to a shell, and Ryuishi walked through the streets as they ran red with fire and blood from both sides. They don't talk about squad eleven, the previous owner of Kubikiribōchō, or Keiko.

Zabuza never brings up the fact that Ryuishi seems incapable of withstanding silences for very long, and fills quiet up with song. He's pleasantly surprised to find out she can sing, even if half of them seem to be in some strange language. She doesn't tell him that she spent two years in isolation in a concrete bunker, with only Orochimaru and hallucinations as company, mending up her broken psyche.

Ryuishi never asks why Zabuza always patrols the house or campsite before they sleep, or why he compulsively checks for traps he knows aren't there. To her it's obsessive behavior that adds extra security, and even though she knows the symptoms of OCD, she doesn't call him out on it. In turn, he never tells her how sometimes hunter-nin were not above attempting to cannibalize their own ranks in order to make their quota, and he had a hefty bounty on his head.

There is so much not talking going on it is deafening. They are a prime example of how not to handle emotions. Really, it should come as absolutely no surprise that not only does Ryuishi have horrible night terrors, but Zabuza, apparently, also has trouble sleeping. They're like twins in this matter. Which, honestly? More funny than it sounds.

Her first response when she wakes up in the middle of the night is to wonder what the absolute fuck woke her up, because she's Watanabe Ryuishi, and she doesn't just wake up for no damn reason in the middle of the night.

She doesn't have to go pee, which is what usually happens if she wakes up at night, and she doesn't have a severe case of the midnight munchies, which is the only other thing she can think of.

Dazedly, she blinks her eyes in the darkness and wonders for a moment if there is a fire, and if she cares about that fire. She realizes that she doesn't, then tries to figure out why she isn't dreaming right now.

An arm tightens around her waist, and there a hand pressed flat against her back, which isn't as weird as it sounds, she swears. It's just Zabuza sprawled out on top of her, his head resting on her stomach, and his arm thrown out to the side. He must have snuck in at some point, like he has been for the past few nights. It's alarming to think that he's sneaky enough to just slip inside her bed these days without her waking up, but he was a hunter-nin. He specialized in sneaking up on people, which is weird, because Zabuza is so... well, *Zabuza* .

His breathing is what tips her off, though, because it isn't shallow and rhythmic, it is rapid and erratic, and she can feel shallow puffs of hot air running over her navel. His muscles are straining, and she can feel his heartbeat against her thigh, drumming like a hummingbird's wings.

"Zabuza," she mumbles, and the arm around her tightens even further, his fingers digging into the her tissue like blunted daggers. "Shhhh," she shushes nonsensically, and the hiss seems to make him stir, because he growls and opens his eyes, slits of white and brown in the darkness.

"It's okay," she tells him, because she can recognize a night terror when she sees one, even if Zabuza is a stoic fucker and seems to handle them better than her.

Ryuishi reaches out her hand slowly and goes to run it through his hair, but the movement seems to set him off, and the hand that was off to the side closes around her wrist, angling it strangely in his grasp like a threat. She can feel the strength in his grip, the bones in her arm straining with the odd angle, threatening to crack.

The pain seems to wake her up a bit at least, even though it's really kind of hard to register these days.

"Fuck," she bites out, and there is another warning rumble in from his chest as he rises up slowly over her, his arm leaving her back and reeling back. His eyes are narrowed and glazed, and she wonders briefly if she should feel afraid. He was a hunter-nin, an assassin, and he has mastered the art of silent killing. There are a thousand ways he could end her life right now.

Yet, she can't feel fear in her heart, because there is only concern.

"Zabuza," she whispers, "Zabuza, you aren't there and you are totally safe." She lets her tense body relax, and he seems to slow a bit, hesitating at the sound of her voice.

"Last night I made pork buns, and Haku had never had them before. He got all wide eyed and tried stuffing his face, and honestly, what have you been feeding that child?"

The grips on her wrist wavers, but it doesn't let go, and the hand reeling back to strike her seems to lower as well. There are flickers

in his eyes of slowly dawning awareness, and she smiles to let him know she's okay, that this is okay.

"You're home, Zabuza. Not in the field, or the barracks, or even Water Country. You're home," she tells him, and he lets go of her wrist, blinking drowsily a few times, his sharp breathing seeming to even out.

"Ryuishi?" he grunts, and she nods. For a moment they just lie there while he gets his bearings back, his weight pinning her down, his arms on the mattress beside her.

Then he drops like a stone on top of her, driving the air from her lungs. She wheezes as he wraps his arms around her like a vice and rolls them both over so he's lying on his back, and she is crushed against him.

"Bad dream?" she mumbles, her face crammed somewhere between his pectorals and his shoulders.

He doesn't say anything at all, and she doesn't force him. Somewhere in the distance, the sound of little feet pounding up the stairs is heard and she smothers her amused smile in his manboob. Haku really needs to work on his stealth.

The door swings open, and though she can't see anything, she is almost sure the little Yuki boy is standing there in his pajamas, staring at the two of them with sleepy eyes and mussed up hair.

"Zabuza-sama?" he asks, and she snorts, appalled that he still gives her teammate so much respect.

"How?" she returns, because she's fairly sure he had been asleep and she, at most, loudly spoke to Zabuza to talk him down. No way that woke him up.

"I felt his chakra," he answers, and that makes sense. Even though she has absolutely zero chakra sensing abilities, apparently it isn't

that uncommon of a skill to pick up on chakra spikes when someone is in distress. The only time she personally has ever felt anything like that though is when someone flares it out on purpose for intimidation or attack.

Zabuza just mumbles nonsense under his breath, his eyes half lidded and heavy, and Ryuishi awkwardly bends her arm at the elbow to pat the mattress beside them. If Zabuza didn't have her arms pinned to her side, it would have been much smoother.

"Come on in with us," she invites. "The more the merrier, Haku."

She hears the swish of displaced air as the door clicks back into place, and then feels the dip in the mattress as the eleven year old climbs his way up to them. She feels him awkwardly crawl up beside them and she raises the covers as best as she can for him to slip inside.

He does, and Ryuishi practically coos at how cute he is in his worried and sleepy state. Even past her own tiredness she thinks that his little braid is absolutely adorable, and there is nothing more moe than his big eyes blinking at her in the darkness.

"Is everything okay?" he asks as the covers settle over him, and she uses that awkwardly bent arm to draw him closer to the both of them.

"Everything is going to be fine," she assures him, wishing for a moment that Zabuza would let her out of the bear traps he calls arms so she could drop a kiss on the boy's forehead. "You don't need to worry, okay?"

He looks uncertain, his eyes darting up to look at Zabuza's face, but the swordsman simply lies there with his eyes closed.

"Are you sure?" he asks, and she hums out an affirmative.

"Go to sleep," grumbles Zabuza, and Ryuishi rolls her eyes. Easy to say for the one that woke them all up in the first place.

But it is late, and Ryuishi feels safe here. She is warmed by the heat of Zabuza, and endeared by the presence of Haku.

In the morning, the three of them are some sort of modern art, because Haku drools, open mouthed and cute as hell, and Zabuza somehow obtained boa constrictors for arms when nobody was watching, which he uses to great effect. On one side Haku is trapped against his chest, and on the other he wrangles Ryushi's legs as she sprawls out over them both, her long hair everywhere. It's a dog pile of the greatest proportions, and it feels like family.

It should be no surprise to anybody *anywhere* that Ryuishi takes to Haku like an Uchiha to Katon Jutsu.

Haku is wary of her, unsure of his place and what she is in relation to Zabuza, and he is flat-footed and unfailingly polite to her. He's also about four kilos underweight, all skinny arms and slender shapes while the changes of puberty are upon him. Zabuza fares similarly, and it's only because she herself came from where they once were that she sees it.

They don't have good gear, or travel ready supplies. They only have a few sets of clothes, and they are worn with age and time, mended with careful stitches that Ryuishi recognizes as the exact sutures that Zabuza used to stitch her up with until they got to a medic.

She takes one look at their stock, and figures that her meals will do enough to put meat on their bones, but they really need to go shopping.

"We're going to River Country," Ryuishi states at dinner one night, watching Haku delicately consume his Cakalang fufu, which is surprising considering it's grilled skip-jack on a fucking stick.

Zabuza, ever the carnivore, has no such reservations, and tears into his like a wild dog. She's surprised that he hasn't broken the skewer

at this point, and that his bowl of rice hasn't somehow managed to spill itself across his chest.

"Why?" he asks through a mouth full of food, and she narrows her eyes, wondering how it manages to stay in his fat mouth.

"Because all of your supplies are second rate. Haku's clothes don't even fit him, your pants go up to your damn waist, and your sandals look like they haven't been switched out in years," she tells him bluntly. "I won't even get into your bags, or lack thereof, or your armor-again, lacking."

He shrugs his shoulders nonchalantly, tearing another piece of meat off. She wishes he would remove his mask when eating, but apparently he only needs to unwind it a little. She wonders how that works out for him later, when he has to rewind it with fish breath. What if he burps? What if he vomits inside his mask? Wait, has she ever witnessed Zabuza vomit, ever?

"There's no money," he informs her, and she stares at him. She just-*really* ?

"Zabuza," she drawls, "You do realize that I am the creator cum director of a trade conglomerate, and the leader of an entire underground movement of people, yeah?"

He pauses chewing to turn his focus away from his food and onto her, squinting his eyes in a way that would be threatening if his cheeks weren't bulging, stuffed full of food. Haku seems to follow his lead, looking over at her with curiosity.

"There *is* money," Zabuza says slowly with an air of dawning comprehension.

"Keep going," she encourages, taking a sip of her tea.

"Enough money to build a house," he continues, examining her closely like he hadn't noticed something before.

"Almost there, Zabuza."

He swallows his food and looks around the dining room, taking in the fully stocked kitchen over the bar, the hardwood floors, the carefully crafted table, and the durable dishes set out in front of him.

"You have money," he says quietly.

"Yes I do," she confirms, and he seems to take that in, staring at the food in the new light.

"A lot of money," he stresses, and she nods, knowing that he will catch the movement out of his peripherals.

"It's one of the perks of successfully directing trade and taking bounties in over the course of eight years," she informs him. Some of it funnels in back through the tax system she has set up, because if everyone else is going to pay them, so is she. She does get some stable income, though.

Anyway, she can understand why Zabuza seems so stunned with this information. In her past life she had never been even near middle class, and in this one she came from fucking Kiri of all places. Poverty was a way of life, institutionalized in ways that many could not see. It was always wondering when the next check came, wondering when the next expense would run you dry. It was constant anxiety about injuries and accidents.

In Kiri, where food was rationed and most of the cut went to the governing body to give to the daimyo or to be funneled into services used by shinobi, it meant that even as one of the Seven Swordsmen, Zabuza would spend his income replacing gear and keeping shelter for both him and Haku. It was middle class living, if that, because Kiri had probably taken more from mission pay in an effort to keep itself afloat.

Ryuishi herself really didn't buy too many things, and she was frugal beyond imagination. Money was important, it was the baseline of her

business in a way. While she excelled in alternative forms of currency, setting up a system based on the exchange of goods and services, she also ran a tight-fisted leadership with the common currency of the continent. Money and gold, they were one of her sources of power. She was fairly sure at this point she could retire and never do anything ever again, if she didn't have to worry about her political and militaristic schemes as well.

"So, we are going to River, and then you two are going to buy everything you want or need-

Zabuza opens his mouth.

"-within reason. While I may be somewhat rich, I want to continue to be somewhat rich, and therefore we will not be buying any small countries, super-weapons, excessive amounts of drugs, useless scrolls, human slaves, inordinate amounts of alcohol, or other houses just to say we have two," she stipulates, nipping his enthusiasm in the bud.

He closes his mouth, and she turns to Haku, who is watching them with a shy, almost guilty expression.

"Anything you want kid," she says gentler.

"Please, I don't need anything-" he tries, but Ryuishi cuts him off, a manic gleam in her eye.

"Oh no, Haku-kun. None of that. You *will* choose out a new outfit, some decorations for your room, new weapons, a travel bag, and any toy, snack, or entertainment item you see," she orders. "I won't have anyone say that a child under my care is not well provided for."

" *Your* care?" interjects Zabuza gruffly.

" *Our* care," she amends, but it really doesn't matter to her whose care it is in name, because there is a child in her house, and she's going to raise it right. Zabuza can suck a fat one if he thinks for one

second she isn't going to be teaching him other things than how to kill a person silently two hundred different ways. Ryuishi is a sucker for kids, and she might have been preoccupied with her own reunion with Zabuza, but Haku was one of hers the moment she first saw him.

The boy in mention stares at her, mouth the slightest bit agape, his eyes flicking between the two adults in the room. They stare at him, united in the fact that they are determined to spend money on him, and he wonders why he feels like less of a tool and more of a child.

(It's not a bad feeling.)

AN: Alternately this chapter could be surmised as 'Two dangerous missing nin attempt cohabitation and also raise a child' or 'Nobody talks about things they really should and everybody is fucked up'. Even 'Zabuza throws himself into Ryuishi's life and brings a child'. Maybe 'What the fuck are ethics, & who cares?' or 'Author writes stealth Haku who is DFAB, but is a boy.'

Zabuza seems like the character to just waltz right in, find what works, and then let it happen. He's the type who deals with things as they come, and not fret about morality too much. He's also the type to remember names and faces really well, and some people make his shit list. Haku follows his lead at first, but we will see changes. Also, Haku is around eleven and probably the most emotionally stable and mentally well.

Bluh, this chapter could have been executed better but there is SO MUCH I need to pack in before the timeskip. I work ahead, so I'm already on canon chapters, but I am constantly re-writing sections, which must be a headache for my beta. I'm sorry Enbi, I love you. Two more chapters until time skip, unless you count the summary of the skipped years, in which case, that is the chapter after next. Also, I have a poll up, and double also, ZABUZA AND RYUISHI ARE STILL PLATONIC.

I am blessed by my lurkers, my favoriters, and my followers. As for my reviewers, you guys dropped like two hundred reviews for the last chapter and I legitimately broke down in tears. You're support keeps me strong, and I am overwhelmed by your support. Thank you for every single review, and I hope that each and every one of you has something magically cool happen too you.

To those who gave fanart, please let me feed you your favorite food. It's on my tumblr (alleycat4eva), which is focused around nonsense but occasionally holds spoilers or rants about OTRATS.

May my beta reign strong on the fury road. Let us give thanks to Enbi, who edited over 16000 words in one week. Amazing. AMAZING I LOVE THEM THEY ARE LIFE.

Question: What theme song would you pick for Of The River and The Sea? OR In this chapter we see the three in a puppy pile, and Ryuishi gets in the habit of it. What happens if she goes over to Konoha and DEMANDS a puppy pile with Kakashi?

Interlude: Setting the Board

I do not own Naruto. Warning, this chapter may be rough.

"Haku, what are you staring at?"

Haku doesn't know how to answer that. He would answer with the correct reply if he could, but he honestly isn't sure what he is looking out at through the big windows. To be more specific, the big windows facing the beach.

There are a lot of windows in this house. It's just one of the things he likes about it. It makes the house seem even bigger than it already is, and the sunshine spills through them, illuminating everything in a warm, golden glow.

It's a very nice house, with its hardwood floors and its big, airy layout. Its ceilings are tall and cathedral-like, and everything is very clean. It's better than any house there was in Kirigakure, certainly much finer than the barracks that he so often slept in with Zabuzasama. It's warmer as well, but not too warm. Outside it might be, but the inside is cool and dry, and it smells like flowers even though he hasn't seen a single one since they got here.

There's food, too. Food like Haku never knew existed, in all sorts of shapes and colors. Spicy pork with chilies, and fish grilled over fire with sauce so savory he could taste it forever afterwards. There are so many sweets, and they are *everywhere*. Haku found candy in the soap dish in the bathroom for some reason, and there was buns with custard filling on the counter, ready to eat. He hasn't had this much food... ever.

Then there are the clothes, ones that are so soft and smooth to the touch. Haku is still reeling from their shopping trip to the Land of Rivers. He now has armored gauntlets for his forearms and hands,

and shin guards made from ceramic and steel. She bought him so *many senbon*, and then a chest plate because she was worried. He was given sandals made for his foot size, with no wear or tear, brand new even, and hairpins of all kinds.

Master Zabuza got new things as well. New pants, new knives, new shoes, new elbow guards, new shin guards, new wraps, new weapons oils, new *everything* . He can hear her voice now.

" No, what the fuck is that? Cow print warmers? No Zabuza, they looking fucking stupid. Get the black ones."

" Haku, I'm not really sure about that color, because it's sort of... vivid, but if it pleases you, you buy whatever you want."

" Oh, my own sweet ass. No, Zabuza, pinstripe pants aren't cool, and they shouldn't go up to your waist! Blue, grey, black, or green is fine as long as they sit on your waist, like pants are supposed-you know what? You wanna look ridiculous? Fine. Keep the pants, but I will not be seen with you and that cow print."

" No... actually that chest strap thing looks really, uh, good..."

"Haku," commands the gravelly voice, and he snaps out of his wandering thoughts.

"I'm... not sure Zabuza-sama," he tells the swordsman.

There is a the sound of footsteps behind him, and a muffled grumbling sound as his master approaches the windows from behind Haku. He feels him approach, the way he has always been able to see people without seeing them. His chakra is thick and heavy, almost smothering in its density, but the malevolent feel of it is familiar and safe.

It is not like Ryuishi-san's, which is hollow and hungry, concealed and flowing like a vortex. Where Zabuza's is thick and congealed with the threat of violence, hers is constantly moving, a stream of

water churning over something empty and hollow. When felt alone, either chakra signature is strong, but when they are together, they harmonize and seem to run complimentary to each other, almost content to mingle as if they had minds of their own. Like... like two streams converging.

The taller man comes to stand beside him, looking out at the beach and seeing the lone figure past the sand, who is maneuvering between waves.

Haku would hesitate and say she was training, but it doesn't look like training. It looks like she's playing sort of game with her weapon, the long chains swinging around in powerful circular arcs. The center of the metal links lay behind her neck as she directs them with her hands and feet, nudging them in completely opposite directions with her elbows and legs. Her stance bobs and sways in time with the waves under her feet, and she arcs her back so sharply backward he is sure she has snapped her own spine.

The bladed end of her weapon sweeps around, inches above her folded body, her arms akimbo, her legs solid on the tide, and she waits for it to pass over before she kicks off the surface of the water and flips her legs around gracefully until she isn't bent backward, but forward, her head not having moved.

Chakra jolts beside him, and Haku turns away from the sight to look at his master, who stares out at the scene for a moment, his face twisted into something like anticipation.

"Haku," he states, turning away, his eyes scanning for his sword.
"Stay out of range. I'm going out there."

"Yes sir," he answers, bewildered as his teacher scrambles eagerly over to his new sandals, cramming them on his feet forcefully before snatching up his legendary blade from where it rests and rushing through the door.

Haku blinks and watches as the man he has come to respects kicks up sand as he dashes over the beach to where the woman continues to contort with her weapon. "Out of range" is the porch and a little bit of the beach, right? He supposes that since the orders were not exact, he will not be breaking them if he goes outside to watch.

He watches from the open doorway as his master rears back his blade for a strike and slices forward without warning in a motion that Haku has seen tear practice dummies in half. For a moment his breath catches in his throat because there is such a large possibility that *Ryuishi-san could die from that strike*, but then her foot is raising itself, wrapped in chain as Kubikiribōchō cuts downwards. Metal meets metal, and there is a sudden stillness as Zabuza-sama stands, ready to cut her down, and she balances on a single foot, her head turning to face her attacker.

Haku has the sudden, shocked realization that she blocked it on instinct.

Then the clean, briny air of the beach turns suffocating, because their chakras spill out of them together like a contest, hovering around their bodies. His master's demon-like chakra boils out of his body, thick and malignant, bubbling with something unsettling and unkind, and hers reaches out to meet it, hard to look at and harder for him to feel, ugly and unnatural against his senses. The air around them warps with the tangible threat of violence, and Haku feels like a rabbit between two tigers as killing intent spikes the air.

Then, he watches in amazement as they move.

It's a spar in the way that gold is a metal. His sensei goes to kick out the foot she is standing on, but she swivels at her waist like a snake, blocking his foot with a single hand and redirecting it away from her. Her other arm sweeps around, dragging blade and chain to swipe upwards from below. His master pushes back, already following through with another stroke of his sword.

It crashes down where she once was, but she's sliding around to his side, her legs somehow both back down on the water's surface, her arm cocked back to punch him in the kidneys.

It lashes out, but meets solid metal, and the sound of it echoes across the beach.

Haku watches as she slides back, propelled by the force of her own blow, and she starts moving again, twisting and churning like a rippling whirlpool, her weapon lashing out as his master. It starts slow, in strokes that even he could deflect, the bladed ends of the chain darting out towards his master. She has the advantage of distance, but Zabuzza deflects them again and again as the speed builds, even as they come in tandem from two different directions at once. It becomes a blur of movement, silver chain reflecting the light of the sun from twenty places at once until Haku knows he would not be able to withstand it.

Zabuzza does.

Then he reaches out, faster than Haku can track, and he snatches the chain she wields and he pulls on so suddenly she is sent racing towards his outstretched blade, a smile on her face, chain wrapped around her fist.

Again, for a heartbeat he is sure the water will run red with her blood, but she flips herself around, her hands angled beneath her, and she defies all logic when she *catches the back of his sword in her hands*

.

He is stunned, and even his teacher seems shocked as her feet arc over her head, and she kicks them out at his face. His teacher barely blocks it, his forearm smashed into his nose by the force of the blows.

Haku winces and begins to wonder where he puts his healing balm.

There is a snarl, and his teacher strains as he throws his blade high into the air, the woman who once gripped it tight forced to let it go as it spins. She flips gracefully, her hands flying through hand seals as Zabuza spins through his own at a dizzying speed.

It takes seconds, but Kubikiribocho drops into his hands as four more of him form from the water, all identical and ready to fight.

She never finishes the seals in air, but rather plummets back down to earth and splashes beneath the ocean's surface.

For a moment the tension runs thick through the air, and Haku stands on the porch as the Zabuza's circle around, staring down at the sea in attempt to spot their opponent. He feels something burst into life, chakra masterfully woven with water, and it slides out underneath the waves, enclosing the mizu clones.

Then it slips above the surface, and the sound of rushing water overpowers the sound of waves as a serpent's mouth emerges and swallows the first Zabuza, and then the second and third, and the fourth attempts to stall it with his sword before it bursts into mist, and the real Zabuza holds it at bay, grunting as the serpentine form crashes against the side of his sword, both hands braced against it.

Haku almost does not notice the feminine hand wrapped around his master's ankle until it is too late, and neither does his master, because it tugs him down and the jutsu goes soaring overhead, crashing into the water and disappearing.

For a moment Haku is stunned, because nothing but the empty looking ocean greets his gaze. It is nothing but azure water and rolling waves accompanied by the sound of water lapping against sand.

The tranquil scene is ruined by a sudden splash as a female form is sent out of the water, an angry screech tumbling out of her mouth as she flips through the air, gripping her chains tight.

An arm surfaces, and his master hauls himself out of the waves, his once spiky hair limp and dripping everywhere. His mask is torn away from his face, and his chest heaving as he hunches over and pants for breath. There is a suspicious red mark near his ribs that looks like it will turn purple later, and he seems to be clutching his privates protectively through his pants.

His opponent lands and skids across the surface, crouching to dissipate the force of impact, her face dusted red with a blush, or maybe rage. Her wet bangs are molded to her cheeks and neck, and her hand is carefully holding one of her breasts.

" *I'll kill you,*" she hisses.

Zabuza looks up at her, and the noise that escapes him is some sort of a growl crossed with a dry heave. She snarls at him, and they ease themselves back up, murder in their eyes.

Haku watches as they attempt to tear each other apart, working to some rhythm he can't name. Their movements are practiced, and as time goes on, they seem to get a better read on each other, moving in concert and striking in tandem as they dance around the surf, chakra thumming and killer intent radiating through the air.

It's the first time Haku has witnessed them spar, and it is ruthless and terrible. They attempt to crush each other into paste, and they seem all the happier for it, if their grins are anything to go by.

He feels his determination burn inside of him, because his master does not have to hold back with her. She, who once was his tool, now clashes with him as an equal, even if there is no winner of the spar. They are both so strong and capable, and it is intimidating to him.

Haku remembers how delighted he was to be given a purpose, and how much Zabuza-sama has provided for him. He wriggles his toes in his new shoes, and thinks of this grand house he gets to call a home.

They don't need his protection, but he will serve them to the best of his capabilities. Maybe they don't need another fighter, but he doesn't think that either of them know anything more than basic first aid. He can learn to heal them, he's sure Ryuishi-san can provide him with ways to help him learn.

He won't let his precious people get hurt.

Orochimaru's golden eyes slide over to the smiling face of the woman in front of him, and to the swordsman glowering from the back of the chamber far away, concealed in shadow as if it will hide his blatant displeasure.

Something like distaste for the boy glaring at him grows inside his chest, and Orochimaru is distantly aware that he does not particularly like the spiky-haired brat. He enters with his scowl and hatred thinly veiled behind his mask, plodding behind his business partner like he belongs anywhere near her. As if she is still some wisp of a kunoichi from Kiri under his thumb, and not something that towers above the average ninja, holding true power in her hands.

"Success is a good look on you," Ryuishi states, her keen eyes tracing the pleased pinching of his serpentine eyes.

"A touching sentiment," he drawls. "One might think you actually meant it."

Years of research and toil have finally come to fruition, and the body he wears now is not the one he was born with. Through hard work and experimentation, he was finally successful in creating a seal that allowed him to transcend the natural confines of physical and spiritual essence and transfer them into another body. He was finally successful in dominating the original spirit inside the host.

It makes him want to laugh in delight, because he has found a way to defeat death itself. He has overcome his own mortality, and though it did not come easily, he succeeded. Now only he will be

able to commit himself to the final journey of the soul. The frailty of growing age and failing body can no longer touch him. His back doesn't ache, and his joints do not protest, because there is no need. He is young again, with supple flesh and eager muscle ready to strain under the pressure of growth. He will always be young now.

Still, subtle rage lingers in his mind like a poison, tainting this joyous occasion. That treacherous little brat took his hands. If not for the Uchiha, Orochimaru could have stayed within the Akatsuki for years, learning more about their organisation and missions, usurping their control from within. The shadowy depths of Ame were closed to him now because of that pretentious, calculating little boy.

He is talented, yes, and Orochimaru would have done much to make him a host body. With the Sharingan in his grasp, nothing could have stopped him. There would be no jutsu he could not learn, no forbidden technique beyond him, no opponent too strong. The world would have broken beneath his feet in a single instant, brought low by his own hands and spinning red eyes.

Now the organization is his enemy. He has never taken well to disrespect, and the treatment they allowed is galling. Those self-righteous misfits were deluded if they thought for a moment that they had a chance to gain a foothold in the Elemental Countries after his defection.

He smirks to himself, remembering the damage he left on his way out. It will take them years to unravel all of his sabotage, especially now that they are forced to rely on the puppet master's spies instead of the superior network the Mumei turned out to be when combined with his own informants. The damage he left will linger, and he hopes that they acknowledge that they only have themselves to blame. Disrespecting one's betters had consequences.

"Well, at least nothing can distract you from the village now," the girl in front of him remarks casually, and he sneers at her. As if that was ever a problem for him.

"The same," he rasps, his eyes locking with the angry swordsman, "cannot be said for you."

She stands just a little bit straighter, and the man bristles though he is too distant to hear their words. Her eyes sharpen, and there is a hint of something pleading inside of them.

"I thought you of all people would understand," she hisses. "My focus will only increase now that I don't have to constantly worry about one of them."

"He's not proven himself trustworthy-"

" *He came back to me!* "

His look silences her, and he can feel how much effort it is taking her to control her body language and not alert their watcher.

"He returned, but for what reason? It could be sentiment, but it could be his need for resources, to infiltrate, or a coup. You give your trust too easily," he snaps at her, and he can see the doubt he plants inside her heart. Strangely, it does not please him.

"Remember your place. Oto is set to ascend to its place of power, and you *will* be there to see its steady rise. Do not miss the accumulation of our hard work because you are chasing memories you warped inside your mind to look better over time."

This time, her face blanks completely in an effort not to give anything away. Still, the clawed shape of her hands and the hard set of her eyes tells him how offensive she thought the remark to be.

She takes a deep, steadying breath, and reads the motive behind Orochimaru's words. From his point of view, there is indeed a threat in Zabuza. Not only does it infringe upon his influence on her to have an outside attachment so close, but she has displayed remarkable tenacity in the past when it comes to her old unit, as well as instability. Her unit was her biggest trigger for doubt and self

loathing, as well as anxiety and depression. For the man who took her and pieced her back together, they were nothing but a problem when it came to mental health. What he never realized was it wasn't her unit that caused those problem, it was her loss of them. To have hope again, to have a pillar and support, it was relieving.

Not only that, but at this delicate point of time, her inattention or ignorance could cause devastation. With Grass so close to the edge, just waiting to be taken advantage of, a mistake on her part could cost them valuable trade and manpower. Worse, it could draw the attention of the Elemental Countries to them.

Plus, how suspicious would it be to her if Jiraiya or Tsunade suddenly decided to waltz back into Orochimaru's life and claim loyalty to him? How much would she doubt their intentions, and how big of a threat would they be?

"Always the devil's advocate," she accuses coldly, locking her eyes with his. "I can see the logic behind your concerns, but I have no doubt that should any of them come true, you will not hesitate to remind me of my responsibilities."

He examines her closely, noting her posture and stance. Still relaxed and casual to most examiners, but her conviction shines through none the less. The fact that she considers his words instead of dismissing them outright displays her ability to think rationally about the situation instead of emotionally. Even as close as she is to the swordsman, she still has sound judgement, for now.

"If I must remind you, it will not be pleasant," he informs her simply, and she smiles tightly in understanding. She knows what is at stake, and the lengths he will go to ensure its completion.

"Just remember, *partner*," she states, stressing the word, "that I am not powerless myself."

His slitted pupils focus on her, and the grin he gives her is unsettling, because they are both too interwoven to hurt each other without

hurting themselves. It may not always remain so, because they are both treacherous in their own ways, but for now it is an unavoidable truth.

"As long as this latest... development does not impede you," he states slowly, "then there should be no problems."

If the swordsman from her past does betray her, or present himself as a detriment, well... Orochimaru has never been one to let obstacles remain in his path. He will eliminate the boy, should it come to that.

After all, he will always be around to piece such a useful accomplice back together.

Hatake Kakashi wants to pummel her into paste the moment he sets eyes on the missing-nin sitting docilely in the darkened corner of the inn. She's watching the both of them just as attentively as he is watching her.

"Falsifying mission requests is a crime," he informs her gruffly as he settles himself in the booth. He scans her over, looking for signs of injury and distress. There aren't any major physical tells, or awkward movements on her part. In fact, this may be the least injured he has seen her in a while.

Tenzō slides himself down beside his captain, and the three of them plaster on fake smiles and genial body language, as if they are good friends meeting up in a bar instead of operatives on a mission.

"It's a good thing I'm already a missing-nin," she snarks, "and that Konoha shinobi have no authority this close to Takigakure."

He holds back a acidic remark, because she is right, this is neutral territory. It isn't under her influence, and even if he pulled rank, it would mean nothing here.

"Where have you been?" he asks, changing the subject, and she rolls her eyes at his tone.

"Fuckin' all over, but I didn't spend a buttload of cash on this mission so we could gab like old biddies on bingo night," she states calmly.

"You actually paid for it?" Tenzō asks, appalled. It's not a cheap thing, to hire ANBU operatives. In fact, he was under the impression that one didn't really hire them at all, and that the Hokage directed their missions personally.

"It was the biggest pain in my ass to make sure you fucks got it too," she bites out. "It's not something I can do regularly, or even more than once, but I don't have time to fuck around."

... Which is all a lie. She did put in a request, but it wasn't as an asset, it was as herself, the Rakki Ryuu. The Hokage was pretty much obliged to send her handler to her, because she was a political asset and he probably didn't trust anybody else with her at this point. Plus, it was the first time she requested anything from Konoha itself after having delivered so much to it.

The old man probably hemmed and hawed and did a bunch of other bullshit she could spend all day speculating about. He probably thought about ambushes or traps or whatever the fuck they thought she could do, but in the end it boiled down to trusting his information and his agents, which he obviously did to some extent.

A complicated mess of shenanigans, she thinks to herself.

"This was marked as an intelligence gathering assignment," Kakashi states coldly, and she makes an exasperated face, eyes facing upward and mouth open to sigh. Moments later there are a stack of files shoved in his lap under the table, out of view from their surroundings.

"Oh, look, it's all that information you were sent to collect," she drawls. "Didn't you think it was weird that they would send an

assassination team for intel?"

He snatches it out of her hands, and she has the impression that if she could see the lower half of his face, he would be sneering at her. Ah, Hatake and his uptight dickery.

"Why didn't you just deliver it like usual?" asks Tenzō, and here she hesitates, scratching the back of her neck and scanning her surroundings.

"Yah, see, about that..." she says slowly, "I can't exactly drop by like that anymore for a while."

They both tense almost imperceptibly, and Hatake narrows his eye at her, leaning in a bit so he can lower his voice.

"Watanabe, what is going on?" he asks, and she cringes, a little embarrassed.

It's not like she can share the good news, because then Zabuza and Haku become targets that Konoha can use to get to her. As it stands, Orochimaru is going to watch her like a fucking hawk, evaluating her performance, and she's going to busy out of her mind building Oto. It takes a metric fuckton of logistics to start up a village, and she's already feeling the pressure of directing trade through so many people in order to obscure the details of where it really goes.

Not only that, but collecting taxes has become a little bit of a nightmare at this point. It's not that people aren't willing to give, it's that ensuring that what is given gets to where it needs to go is a headache. There are Mumei populations all throughout the continent at this point, and each place has different income and base resources. A blanket tax is unfair, and also inefficient, so she has to review who produces what and where they do it. How much does that population require in assistance, and how much are they producing in profits?

There is so much more going on as well. Bandits and missing-nin are a gigantic hassle in this world, and defense for her people and their goods is a must. Not only that, but public services are killing her to figure out. The roaming gangs of Kirigakure clan mothers and their children have worked marginally alright, but with the steady supply of food and healthcare, there's been a slight population boom that she needs to watch like a hawk.

Healthcare is another dilemma. Training a competent healer takes time and supplies, whether they are they iryo-nin that Orochimaru trains, or the more holistic and ordinary medical professionals that come from her own Yuki clan members and educated Mumei. There is a shortage of people to go around, and right now they work on a rotating schedule, but it's not near enough. There needs to be more. More practitioners to go around, more resources from Konoha and Kusa, more *everything* .

Besides the absolutely incredible amount of work needed to go into allowing Oto to rise, now she isn't alone. It's going to be hard enough to convince Zabuza to let her go to Suna, let alone Konoha. It's much harder to sneak in with three people than one.

Granted, Zabuza was a hunter-nin and does have stealth down, but Haku is just a kid. Does he know anything about infiltration, or is it all offensive fighting at this point. What would Zabuza even teach a child? Oh god, she's getting a headache.

"Look, I can't just do what I want anymore," she starts, rubbing her temples idly. "I'm pretty sure I'm going to have to worry for two from now on."

Because Loki knows Zabuza won't worry about Haku's needs beyond the obvious ones. He's done a great job, but does Haku know how to write anything beyond hiragana? The boy also seems clueless about how currency works, and basic literature. He's also completely ignorant about history. Does Zabuza understand how fucked up it is that Haku is going to be hanging around a pair of patented murders without any concept of what regular people do?

She knew graduating early would bite her in the ass someday. Zabuza only spent a single year in the Academy for Hera's sake.

In front of her, two high level operatives choke on air at her words, ignorant to her internal musing.

Kakashi scans her as best he can from his seat. The words 'worry for two' echo inside his head again and again like a bad dream. No wonder she was so unharmed, Watanabe wouldn't want to fight in such a state. Or would she? Did the missing-nin know anything about what she had gotten herself into?

She sighs and meets their eyes, and he notices that she looks... she looks like she isn't wearing herself out so much. She's healthier-looking, and the dark bags are gone from beneath her eyes.

A healthy glow, he thinks with dawning horror.

"What do you mean, 'pretty sure'?" croaks Tenzō, and Kakashi feels some ray of hope. Pretty sure can mean many things, it means that it might not be!

"Like, nearly a hundred percent sure. There's no getting out of it now, not that I want to," she says calmly, and his hopes sink into his gut.

"But you're a missing-nin," drawls Kakashi, holding back his instinct to run away from this conversation screaming and enforcing his calm. She is a criminal, but she is, strictly speaking, in his very professional opinion, not entirely scum.

"What's that got to do with anything?" she responds flippantly, and his heart clenches at the words. Doesn't she understand what kind of danger she will be in as a criminal and political leader? What danger the *child* will be in?

"What will you do?" rasps Tenzō, and his whole expression is blank, sinking further and further into Root training. Kakashi is almost jealous.

"I don't see how that's any of your business," she snaps. She glares for a moment, then takes a deep breath, and her expression softens a bit. She looks at them both fondly, and he is taken aback by the affection in her gaze.

"Look, it's not like this is goodbye," she says. "I know you may not think it, but I like to think that despite your obligation to submit anything I reveal as a report to your leader, the attempts to manipulate me into being gracious for attention, the desire to make me indebted to your village, have me turn against everything I know, serve the Hokage as a vassal, the absolutely abhorrent emotional manipulation, and my own shortcomings morally, ethically, and mentally, maybe... maybe we're kinda friends."

He feels like the air has been knocked from his lungs. It's a *huge* confession. Even though she knows that he's giving information to the Hokage, and that he's loyal to Konoha, she still... she still...

"I just have to find a way to hang out with you guys without drawing unwanted attention," she states calmly, and then she looks to the side, her brows furrowed, as if trying to figure it out.

Kakashi sits in a stunned silence, and he simply watches her. It doesn't matter what happened, or how it came to be, but now he acknowledges that the idea of her in such a state frightens him. Not in the same way that Kushina did when she was expecting, but in a different, unsettling way.

A scene flashes through his mind of Watanabe alone in the woods, her belly swollen and round. All around her there are snarls and snaps, and kunai fly through the air as she runs from dangers unseen. War because of a fallen political leader, fire and destruction because of her irresponsibility.

"No," he orders, and she locks eyes with him at the sound, her brows raised questioningly. "I won't allow it," he states firmly, keeping his eye locked on her, his face placid. "You won't do this alone."

Beside him, his kōhai nods, thinking along the same lines. Her expression turns defiant, but he reaches out to grasp her shoulder and lock eyes with her.

"You will come with us," he orders. "If you ask for sanctuary, you won't be denied. You don't have to raise this baby alone."

"Hatake, what the fuck?" she asks, bewildered, but he continues.

"We can leave right now. I don't care whose it is, but you can't just go at this halfheartedly. This isn't a game, this is a life. You are in danger, and it will be too. Konoha has the best medical care in all of the Elemental Nations, and you know it."

" *Hatake . What the fuck,*" she states again, and she turns to Tenzō with desperate eyes as if he will help her.

"Senpai is right," he tells her.

They stare at her, and she stares back, shocked into stillness. Silence passes between them, intense and lingering as she looks at them both.

Ryuishi snorts, turning her face away. It starts as stifled choking noises low in her throat, and for a moment the men think they have moved her to tears, but a chirping laugh breaks their illusion.

"I'm serious," Hatake tells her, and *he totally is*. She can't hold the laughter in and it tumbles out of her as she stares at them, wide eyed and bewildered. It rumbles through her body, and clamps down hard around her gut.

"BWHAHAH-"

He narrows his eye and reviews their conversation in his head while his kohai watches on in confusion.

"-HAHAHAHAH-"

Her hands sink below the table and wrap around her stomach, her mouth stretched wide as she hunches over with the strength of the mirth wracking her body.

"-HAHAHAHA-"

"You're not pregnant, are you," he says flatly, and she shakes her head no furiously as she continues to laugh, tears gathering at the corners of her eyes. He sighs and seats himself once more, resigned to let her have this one. The Mokuton user besides him seems to actually sag in his seat with relief, and he follows suit.

This is better than what they could have hoped for. He doesn't know if anybody is quite ready for a pregnant Watanabe.

Eventually, her obnoxious, belly-deep laughter tapers down into snickers, and she wipes the moisture out of the corner of her eyes, turning her gaze back on them, grinning like a fool.

"Seriously though," she says. "That was sweet."

"Don't," he warns, glad for his mask. He actually feels... *embarrassed* about it.

"No really," she tries, "Offering me sanctuary is one thing, because I would be indebted to Konoha, but offering to help raise it? Insisting that I wouldn't have to do it alone? That's really sweet of you."

"Stop," he groans, but she smiles at him, and he can't deny that he much prefers her like this instead of cold and aggressive like she was in Shimo.

"I mean it Hatake," she insists. "You're a good man."

He looks away, and he can practically feel the warmth radiating from her, wholehearted in ways shinobi should not be.

She turns her head and bumps her leg against against the younger Tenzo's leg, catching his attention as he flushes under her gaze.

"You too, Wood Boy," she says, and in some backwoods inn bar in the middle of Taki, the two wonder what has brought her to this high point, where she glows with affection. It's not the manic energy of their slumber party, or the hunger when she first came to them. It is the calm undercurrent that seems to drive her.

"A-Ah..." he returns, and she shakes her head, looking toward the exit.

"I'm kinda running out of time, but I just wanted to say some things before I have to go," she says. Zabuza won't be distracted much longer, and he'll begin to wonder where she went. Haku is probably back from practice, and they'll be ready to move on.

"First of all," she states, turning her head to the table, "Keep out of my business, but watch the information I give you. There's a lot of things going to keep me busy for a while, but know you aren't my enemy."

Not them, specifically, or Konoha in general anyway. On the other hand, that Sarutobi fuck, or that Danzo shithead might find themselves on her shitlist.

"Secondly: Hatake," she says, giving her attention to the matter at hand. The white-haired male gives her his full attention. "You are a solid guy, and a good person. You carry around way too much guilt that has no place hanging around you. Have some fun, try butt stuff, live a little."

His single eye widens in surprise for a moment before it narrows again, and she sees the outline of a scowl through his mask. She give him a pointed look, because she doesn't care if he doesn't think he should. He doesn't have to carry around the ghosts of his dead team and trauma like woah. He's an okay guy... for a sanctimonious prick.

"Wood Boy," she snaps, turning to look at him. He meets her gaze head on with his crazy big eyes.

"You are very attractive without your headpiece and I am one hundred percent sure you could get laid if you just took it off. I'm also pretty sure that you're awesome, and you deserve to be happy."

He continues watching her blankly, and she nods to herself. That was enough expressing actual emotion for one day. Now she just feels weird. She'll have to spar with Zabuza later to make it go away or something. Nothing like a good, old-fashioned, Mist-style spar to get back to normal. She can almost taste the blood and feel the bruises now.

"Wait, what did you mean by 'worry for two' then?" Hatake asks, and she waves him off, standing up from the booth.

"No time left, sorry guys, I'll see you later," she says.

"Wait!" he calls, but she's slipping away with a wink and a sly grin, disappearing out of the bar, into the crowded streets, to go who-knows-where else. She's very good at slipping out of their grasp, he thinks.

He has the information they were sent to retrieve, and there wasn't much of a conflict. Technically, the mission is complete, far beyond the Hokage's expectations, but he still feels like there is something he's missing. Something that feels ominous.

AN: Half of this might be crack. I'm not even sure how I feel about the last part of this chapter, like at all. I ehhhhhhhhhhhhhh. Idk. There are a couple important things to take away from this chapter though. 1) Haku isn't going to focus on intense frontline combat. 2)Orochimaru doesn't like Zabuza, and Oto is set to rise. 3)Ryuishi, wrongly or rightly, is hiding her contact with Kakashi, and she considers them friends. 4) Kakashi is iffy here, and maybe ooc, but still focuses on the consequences of her actions. He is loyal to konoha first and foremost. IDK how good of a job I did showing these things in this chapter, so just let me make it super clear. And finally, 5) "Watch the information

I give you". These aren't all the things I hope for you to catch (Lookin at you reviewers who told me not to state shit so bluntly)

Next chapter is the time skip, and really packed full of plot. So full of important details. We get back to srs business.

I want to give a shout out to my lurkers, my favoriters, and my followers. My reviewers keep me strong, and all of those songs you guys sent in were fucking awesome. Whoever sent me 'Control' by Hasley, I've been listening to it on repeat for days. Actually, I listen to them all. It's a huge problem. I love my reviewers, they let me know when I fuck up and when I'm doing good. (I think this chapter may be off.)

Blessed be thy beta Enbi, for she maketh thine documents not have enormously shitty grammar and help me when I have the writers block. Behold their glory, for it is beyond grammar.

Also gonna post an totally crack omake on my tumblr (alleycat4eva) of this chapter. I guess I write flash fics and do fic stuff on there now.

Question:What changes do you see happening in canon now that Ryuishi has changed so much? OR Do you think anybody would help Ryuishi is she was honest, or it came out that she was trying to prevent a disaster from happening?

In Which Much is Done

I do not own Naruto.

Four years do not just pass in the blink of an eye. That's not how it works. Especially not with so much going on, not with who she is, what she is doing. She will say that those first months with Zabuza and Haku are like a drink of cold water after being dehydrated to a near death point for several years. It's healing, it's acceptance, and it is more than she can ever express with words.

It's almost her dream come true, to be woken up by Zabuza in the morning. He's a morning person, always has been, and he's up and showering before her eyes open. It's truly sickening, how ready to go he is at like eight o'clock in the fucking morning, but in the best way possible. She isn't alone anymore, because Zabuza knows the evils of her heart and the treachery she can commit, and he still accepts her. He braids her hair at night after he sharpens his sword, even though she hasn't done it in years, calling it 'weapons maintenance' like they are kids again. Sometimes he sleeps in the guest rooms, sometimes in her bed, and he haunts her house like a giant, possessive wraith that she sometimes gets the violent urge to maim.

There are awkward moments, to be sure. The first time she puts on her glasses around him he looks like so many questions have been answered just by the lenses.

" The whole time?" he asked and she had nodded, feeling self conscious.

" You hid a lot," he told her, and she had felt so ashamed, because she was always going to be hiding things.

Or the time he confronted her about her chakra, finally.

" Is it a Kekkei Genkai?"

She started, and stopped her seal chain, attempting to hide it, but it didn't matter. He could feel it there, even though it wanted to go ignored. It had always been there, like his own demonic energy, and they resonated.

" Is yours?" she shot back.

Nobody knew. Their chakra was the way it was. It had been that way since they were children.

He doesn't really demand much, and he sort of just sets himself in her life, and throws himself into her routine, changing everything. They're touch-starved, emotionally stunted, mildly unstable, and paranoid ninja, and sometimes it shows. Ryuishi learns to never mess with flash fire in the kitchen after it drive Zabuzza out of the room out in a cold sweat, and he learns that she sometimes pushes past what is healthy. She learns that he smashes the toothpaste all over the damn sink, drops clothes around the house, and uses dishes then doesn't wash them. He learns that her long hair sheds like an animal's, she pops her gum, and she has so many secrets they wrap around her like chains.

They work around it.

Haku becomes some sort of... she doesn't actually know. Because he's not a tool, not at all. He'll never be a tool, something to use and discard, and she knows for a fucking fact that Zabuzza can see that too.

He's not like them. She can't just travel for days at a time without breaks anymore, because Haku isn't old enough to keep up with the pace, and she and Zabuzza can't just do as they used to. There is some sort of line they both can't clearly see but know not to cross, something in them that hopes that Haku is better than they ever were, and that he finds more peace than they have.

He's kind, and the first time they go traveling long distance and she kills a rabbit for dinner in front of him, he looks like she's snapped his heart in two instead of the the rabbit's neck. She literally feels so much guilt at his giant woeful eyes that she has to go skin and clean it where the boy won't see. The fact that Zabuza doesn't stop her means he understands. It's like the boy is fucking white snow before anyone has stepped on it, or any dirt has covered it. She's not sure how, because Haku is from Kiri just like them, and nothing remains pure in Kiri without work.

(She has a sneaking suspicion that Zabuza sheltered him, but it's another one of those things they don't talk about.)

There is gentleness in him that goes bone-deep, and he shows it the first time they come back from a spar together, bloodied and bruised because they don't know how to hold back. She's surprised that there aren't any broken bones, but whether that is an issue of control or a statement of skill, she doesn't know.

She does know that the boy approaches them both with a jar of balm in his hands that he uses to tenderly rub into their bruises, and he wraps their wounds with such care that it stuns her. Zabuza takes one look at her poleaxed expression and he grins beneath his mask with pride-as if he can take any credit for Haku's actions.

Ryuishi and Zabuza are creations of the Bloody Mist, the last participants of their infamous graduation exams, and two of the few surviving members of their generation which was lost to the Academy Massacre and the Third Shinobi War. They aren't... she isn't... kindness still appalls her sometimes, because she never gave Haku anything, but he's so nice. He's cute and smart and strong and kind, and he wins her over without ever having to try.

If Zabuza is the one who accepts her and all she is, Haku is the one that reminds them that monstrous places don't have to create monsters alone, that maybe they can do something not entirely shitty. She loves him like she didn't know she could. Even if his desire to please is a bit much, and he really needs to work on his

dreams and goals... well, he's eleven, and he can learn. When she was eleven, she was hallucinating her tits off in one of Orochimaru's hideouts. Things can change drastically.

The point is that Ryuishi isn't alone anymore, and she likes her new cell, she really does, but she can't help but feel she was never cut out to be a leader, and she has no idea what to do. There's a big blue teammate who used to guide them, who completed them. He was the decisive balance between Zabuza's lack of foresight and her own overthinking. Kisame understood Zabuza's linear thought pattern, and could follow her tangled web. He wasn't... he...

He was the man they would follow into hell, and he isn't there.

They are almost whole, but still missing one more piece.

It never really occurs to Ryuishi what being the leader of a pseudo-revolution/social movement really means until it kicks her teeth in so hard that she would have certainly crumbled if not for Zabuza and Haku.

It's about six months from where they began, and she is riding her high like no one can believe. She visits Gaara once or twice, and he seems to be glad to see her. He isn't the shy, stoic little boy she once knew, but he's something other than canon as well. There's a sense of surety in himself that wasn't there before. He's getting along with his siblings, or as much as siblings ever seem to get along. There's... something there. It almost makes her want to forgive Rasa, but the man is still as cold and harsh as ever, trying to outmaneuver her and strip away all she has come to gain. Suna is growing healthier, little by little, but no one really forgets who started it.

It's harder to infiltrate places with Zabuza and Haku, but she has work to do and they can't be by her side constantly. Or rather, they shouldn't, but apparently they find they need to be because that is

not a Suna ANBU and apprentice shadowing her footsteps like wraiths, even more hidden than the actual ANBU tail she is given.

It would be touching if it wasn't so infuriating and dangerous. This isn't a game, this is a hidden village, and they could die.

He seems to think something along the same lines, because after the visit is finished and she leaves beyond the patrol borders to the Land of Wind, he is suddenly there, his hands holding her shoulders, his eyes boring into hers.

"The Snake Sannin," he whispers. "Children of the Kazekage?"

She doesn't answer, because she won't drag this up when Haku is watching, not when it's so serious.

"*A jinchuuriki*?" he bites out, and he shakes her a little, like she's lost her mind. The Bijuu are atom bombs and gods, they are things of myth and devastation, and Zabuza has every right to question her.

"More than one," she admits quietly, out of range of Haku's hearing.

He gives her a look like he's considering hauling her back home and restraining her for her own good, but she smiles at him and stretches on up to press her forehead against his own.

"It'll be okay," she assures him. Because it has to be. Because there's she won't accept it otherwise.

Yet reality does not care if she accepts or not, and it rears its ugly head into her life in the form of a tragedy.

Kusa was boiling over, and it was a minefield waiting to blow. The people there outnumbered the ninja, and the Daimyo was so out of touch it wasn't even funny. With their new education, they began to question what actually made the Daimyo qualified to lead them, and why they weren't getting more out of the deal. They wondered why their taxes were going to pay to produce half rate ninja that didn't

protect them from the roaming gangs and bandits, and why so many defected in the first place. They asked why their best and brightest children were always supposed to go to become those ninja in the first place. People began to wonder about the difference between them and the noble classes, and if it really existed.

It started small, with things that Ryuishi could full support. A drafted petition, public protest, cries for representatives, these were things that they were well in their bounds to ask for.

Then it escalated.

Resentment spiked, and requests and debates became demands and arguments. Ryuishi thought that having the gangs of Kiri clan mothers and their trainees roam would be enough to dissuade them from actually attempting anything serious, but she was wrong. She was so fucking wrong.

The Daimyo believed in his own inherent right to rule, and the people resented him for that. He was an ass, a tiny noble compared to the Five Great Nations, but he was still a noble, with money and manpower in spades. She doesn't know what thought pattern drove them, or why they decided to try it without her, but there was rebellion. Sixteen families protested too loudly, and sixteen families were cut down in Kusa. From husband and wife, to uncles and aunts, to even children, they were wiped clean on the daimyo's orders, and Ryuishi was half a world away when it happened.

Their lands were seized, and when Ryuishi was informed by Kagami of what had happened, she knew that every single one of their deaths was on her hands. She was their leader, and she was responsible for their actions whether she ordered them or not. It was her who instigated the education centers. It was she who told them that they deserved more than they had. It was her stupid fucking need to try and change things that lead to the death of over one hundred civilians.

"It is a small loss, overall. There have been more assets added in the past three months alone. A small cut of some of our hold on the livestock trade," the steely matron croaks in an attempt to comfort her, which doesn't work. At all.

"People aren't assets, Kagami," she bites out.

"You can't afford to stop. If you discontinue now, we will lose the surrounding area," the older woman reminded her, but Ryuishi was reeling. One hundred and seven people *died* because she couldn't control her own people. One hundred seven fucking non-combatants.

"Can we retaliate?" she whispers, because it couldn't be without reason, it shouldn't be. Sure they lost some people here and there, but not like this, never so many at once.

"We can usurp control over time, make examples of the ninja, cut some trade-"

None of it would work though, she knew this already, because that would affect the people themselves. If they cut trade, it would be the civilians that suffered for it, and the ninja were following orders. The Daimyo gave them orders, and he was the one to blame.

*There never was truly a bloodless revolution, she thought, not the Glorious Revolution with Prince William, not the Meiji Restoration in Japan, not even the Haitian Revolution. These people never even had thoughts of change before me, though. **I am responsible for this.***

"No," she whispers, and rage blooms in her heart, familiar and spiteful. It is cold and unyielding, aimed at the Daimyo and herself.

"I want him to pay," she spits. "Not his ninja, not his people, *him* ."

She will never forgive him for this. She will never forgive herself.

"If we move in Kusa, he'll strike out against his people, but we aren't just in the Land of Grass. I want his name to mean less than dirt everywhere he goes. I want his fellow Daimyo to question his honor, his legitimacy, his everything."

Behind her Zabuza stiffens, and she is glad Haku is downstairs, communing with fellow Yuki clan members about healing techniques. She can feel herself hollow out, she can feel the guilt eat at her, but more than anything she can feel her icy cold anger.

"If the Mumei can take information in, they can spit it back out. I know it will mar our integrity the slightest bit, but I don't care if we don't have blackmail on him already, make it up. He reneges on trade deals. He's illegitimate because his father had an affair. He fucks barnyard animals, and *he kills children*. That last one we know is true," she hisses. "From Tani to Iwa, Suna to Kumo, I want it known that *the Daimyo of Grass is trash*. "

Kagami looks at her, and the old woman nods, seeing the wisdom in such an action. In politics, image counts, and he will be dealt a lifelong blow if they ruin his. There is some evidence to work with. It will take time, but it can be done.

"As you wish, Ryuu-hime," Kagami demurs.

Ryuishi feels a pressure inside her build, and she can taste bitterness on her tongue. Even if he dies, it won't bring her people back, but she can't afford to look weak and just let this happen. The council continues, but Ryuishi hardly speaks, and when she does it is in short, clipped answers. She find herself trying to tally her body count in her head, both the deaths she caused directly, and those she is responsible for indirectly.

She finds herself looking over the balcony later, staring out at the lights of the city, and the stars that seem so close in the mountains of Kumo, still attempting to come to a number, but she can't remember them all. Directly, there have been too many that she has cut down, torn apart, and maimed. How many lives did she take in the war?

How many bounty hunters and bandits has she killed in the years while she was setting up the Mumei?

Indirect kills are even harder, because there is just no way to know. How many people would still be alive if she hadn't started the Mumei, or would even more be dead? Is she responsible for the Academy massacre because she knew, could she have even stopped it if she tried? The Fall of Kiri wasn't bloodless, but just how many fell on the other side? Are Orochimaru's sins her own? Does she have the responsibility to stop them because she knows they exist? For that matter, is there a shared toll for the Uchiha Massacre, because she was involved?

Can she do anything right?

"Stop that," comes a gruff, familiar voice.

She turns and looks toward the shadows, and really, she should have known. She can't tell if Zabuza thinks he's her bodyguard, her companion, her legal guardian, or her charge. Probably some strange combo of all of the above.

"Stop what?" she asks.

"The overthinking. The guilt," he answers, and her face blanks as she turns back over the balcony.

"You've gotten better at telling emotions," she teases, but the distraction doesn't work, and he refuses to be mislead.

"You always did this, acted like everything was your problem or your fault," he tells her. "You used to take attacks meant for us. Like we couldn't fight for ourselves."

"It's not that you couldn't fight, it's that you shouldn't have had to," she says with frustration. "You guys shouldn't have been held to those standards, or have had to fight those battles."

He doesn't answer, instead he just comes to stand beside her, his arms crossed as he looks over the city with her. The burning gold of the lights far below casts a shell that barely holds the night at bay.

"Why do you have to?" he asks bluntly, and she bites the inside of her cheek. She doesn't know. She doesn't know why she does, but she has to try and she can't just let it go. She doesn't know if she's doing right or wrong, and there is so much blood, so many lives at stake. Is it better than what is was? Has she changed anything?

"People live and people die. There are tools, users, and something in between the two," Zabuza tells her. "Nothing is perfect."

"This is the vaguest and weirdest talk we have had yet," she snarks, because it's uncomfortable and she doesn't like the atmosphere they have right now. It's too real, too down to earth.

"So stop faltering every time something unplanned happens," he continues, ignoring her. "You can't control everything, and it's not always your fault."

She turns to look at him, and it's like he's pinning her down with his own stare, adamant in his words. It's strange because Zabuza never was the emotional type, and he never really was the reassuring type. Hell, he's not even the talking type, but that was surprisingly... good advice.

"I don't know if I can do that," she answers honestly, because she isn't sure if she can. It's not like it's just going to disappear. She does feel responsible, and she does feel guilty.

A fist careens dangerously fast toward her face, and she tilts her head inches to the right to dodge. Her mind snaps into alert mode, wary of danger and focused on the threat in front of her. Zabuza gives her a challenging noise, and she hisses as he advances on her, giving her no option but to retaliate.

They spar, and she comes to recognize later what it means. Even when she can't stop, even when she over thinks and falters, Zabuza will be there to help her get back on course.

Terumī Mei is the sort of beautiful that is hard to describe in words. She's so good-looking it makes Ryuishi almost instantly self-conscious, because there is no way she could ever compare to the woman. With soft, slender limbs, willowy grace, well-glossed lips, and long, perfectly styled hair, she is intimidating without even trying. She's like, so pretty it's stupid, and so pretty it makes other people stupid.

Ryuishi, with her muscles, scars, and baggy pants, feels immediately like an ugly lump of potatoes in the presence of a goddess. She can literally feel herself lose all coherence, and she automatically blames Zabuza, because he talked her into this little meeting. He said something about rebels in Kiri, regime change, assassinating the asshole Mizukage, and needing a patron. He never said a damn word about attractive women with eyes like gemstones.

She curses under her breath and helplessly looks at Zabuza from the corner of her eye to where he stands with Haku, and he's too busy sizing up Terumī's guards to be of any help.

She screams inside her head uselessly. She thought this shit was over when puberty stopped.

"I greatly appreciate you having an audience with us today, Rakki Ryuu," the redhead-or is it brunette? Oh god, it's some sort of perfect combination of both-intoned, and Ryuishi immediately thinks she is so far out of her comfort zone that it isn't even funny.

"Mah, well, Zabuza-san brought your plight to my attention," she deflects uneasily, trying to make eye contact with said swordsman and failing. "And please don't call me that."

"He has my thanks then, Watanabe-san," she states calmly, and the two women size each other up for a moment.

Oh God, she could melt me with lava, Ryuishi thinks. That shouldn't be attractive. Be professional, me. Get your shit together.

"To be frank with you, I was surprised when contact was made. I was under the impression that you were not interested in assisting the village you burned down before defection," the heavy hitter states, and Ryuishi immediately catches the words gone unsaid in that statement.

You would never help Kiri-after all, you abandoned it like an honorless traitor.

She frowns, because as nervous as the appearance and strength of the other woman makes her, her subtle insult is uncalled for.

"You're right," Ryuishi states bluntly, her eyes meeting the woman's own, "I have no interest in helping a village who mishandles itself so poorly that it can't afford to keep up its own school system, pay its workers well, or provide basic sanitation for the streets. I also am uninterested in assisting a place with a long list of cruelties to its own people, and corruption so rampant it is actually something the country becomes known for. It's why I left in the first place."

Someone behind the rebel leader takes a step forward, their face twisted into a threatening snarl, but Terumī simply holds up up her hand to remind them who is in control.

"You don't deny what you did, though?" she asks, her gaze having turned steely.

"I don't," Ryuishi says seriously. "I own up to it one hundred percent, as long as you also accept that the system I struck out against is so inherently flawed an eleven year old could not only strike out against it, but was motivated to do so."

The woman seems to reevaluate her then, and Ryuishi doesn't care if she's beautiful, smart, and strong. Ryuishi will not be held to some shitty Mist standards that make no sense.

Then, slowly, the Mist kunoichi nods in acceptance.

Ryuishi sighs, because honestly, what a terrible way to start off a trade negotiation. When coming and asking for assistance, one probably shouldn't insult the one they are asking from. More than that, if Terumī thinks that asserting dominance and strength through wordplay is necessary, she's dead wrong. Wordplay is probably one of the few things she can beat most people at.

"I want to change Mist. Not bring back the old ways, but create new ones. Re-structure the Academy, attempt restoration of the buildings, and establish a respectful working relationship between ninja and civilians," Terumī says. "Before I can do any of that, we have to clean out the older rule."

Ryuishi nods, because this is business, and business she knows. "To do either of those things you need supplies, and money," she states calmly.

"Ideally, we would be self sufficient, but reality does not always meet with ideals."

Ryuishi laughs, because by Coyote the Trickster, does she fucking know that or what? Her biggest hassle in life is attempting to match ideals to reality.

"Okay, here's what I can do for you Terumī-san," she states. "I can offer you supplies in the form of food, weapons, clothes, and good old money. If you manage to succeed, I can help get you recognized as the true Mizukage without too many ramifications, but I'm not free. I expect some things back."

The woman looks like Ryuishi slapped her in the face, her eyes wide and mouth slightly open. True, Ryuishi did just offer to support her

rebellion and candidacy as Mizukage, but hello? Archipelago trade center, largest producer of oceanic goods, and a smoking hot lady who can literally spit lava? She would be dumb not to take this chance, not to mention that Ryuishi has access to those things to spare.

"First, if you succeed, I want some of the trade you're going to produce. You are planning this out, right?" Ryuishi asks.

"I was planning to focus on international relations," the woman states, and Ryuishi rolls her eyes. Not bad, but seriously?

"Okay, listen up. The Land of Water is the biggest producer of not only every saltwater fish, crustacean, and mollusk there is, but everyday goods such as seaweed, salt, and oceanic organisms. Those last three are used in the production of not only food, but medicine, beauty products, plastics, sanitation goods, and chemical manufacture," Ryuishi informs her audience.

"Not only that, but everybody fucking knows that the quickest way to the Land of Lightning and the Land of Wind is by sea. Unless you come from the countries that border the Land of Fire, sea trade is much better than land. The taxes you could place on ships using islands as ports wouldn't have to be large for you to incur profit fast, and it gives the ninja force something to do other than fight."

Terumī looks at her intently, as if staring can commit her words to memory. It's sort of scary how much the Daimyo of Water was missing out on by ignoring the production abilities of his islands, let alone the manufacturing that could happen, powered by all that water.

"Usually, I charge for this kind of advice, but now I won't. If you make it to the top, you'll be directly under the Daimyo, who has been running things like shit. Ninja are more than just tools for espionage and violence, they can help set up structure and trade like you wouldn't believe, and as Mizukage you will have the ability to utilize that fact," Ryuishi reminds her. "So yes, develop amicable ties to the

country around you, but also remember that the people of Mist and the Land of Water are used to a horrible system and will need help reaching their potential. Respect not only your subordinates, but the people who help support your entire system. Fostering good relations between civilians and ninja is important to help break the cycle of dickery that Mist propagated, because believe it or not, both ninja and civilians are people."

Terumī looks like she's hit some sort of epiphany during Ryuishi's little rant, and she's examining the scarred kunoichi curiously, her lips twisted into a smirk that does terrible things to Ryuishi's stomach. Butterflies and other nerve-y things.

"You are correct, and I thank you for your council. You truly are one of the brightest that Kiri has ever produced," she says, her voice warm and smooth.

"Urgh," Ryuishi says elegantly, a little tongue tied. She can feel her face flush. She really, really doesn't deserve that.

"If you make Mizukage, please take Zabuzza out of the Bingo Books and off the list of defectors," she blurts instead, and she wants to punch herself in the face. Smooth, real smooth.

The woman raises an imperious eyebrow, and Ryuishi wants to melt into a puddle of embarrassment as she feels eyes lock on to the back of her head.

"I will never be wholly welcomed back in Kirigakure after what I did, and I don't want to go back either. I accept my fate to be hunted, but Zabuzza is one of the Seven Swordsmen, and he brought your plight to me. He's loyal to the idea of a better Kiri," she explains.

Terumī looks flat-out amused, and she can feel the red creep up her neck, because not only is she being sappy, but that is a *really* good look for the Lava Release user.

"If this succeeds, then you have my word that I will pay you back and attempt to create a better Kirigakure, but you are right when you say that the Rakki Ryuu or the Kiri no Ningyo would not be accepted back as a kunoichi of the Mist," the older woman says, her look thoughtful. "But Watanabe Ryuishi would probably find a place as a trade partner and foreign adviser if she helped the new system, and she would need a long term liaison and protector."

Ryuishi whips her head up to stare at the woman, her face a perfect display of confusion, hope, and shock. If she is saying what she thinks she is saying-

"The defection of the Kiri no Kaijuu was a product of a broken system and insurmountable cruelties. They were children who endured much hardship, and their only solace was war and each other," the woman states. "The fact that two of them stand here today to attempt to make their one-time home better will not be forgotten."

Ryuishi can feel her ears burn, and her face flush. She really doesn't deserve this, and it's all just talk unless the rebels succeed, but making sure that her and Zabuza stay together means the world to her.

"The unit is strongest together," Zabuza utters, and Terumī just nods in understanding, looking back to what, presumably, is her own teammate.

They continue hashing out details, and Ryuishi only gives what she can afford to lose, but it still more than the rebels thought they would ever receive. Honestly, the fact that she can somewhat support a rebel faction with her excess wealth without putting too much of a strain at all on her system is surprising.

The Kirigakure team leaves with thoughts of smuggling goods in from Wave and River Country, and possibly the coasts of the Land of Lightning and the Land of Wind, and Ryuishi feels a little overwhelmed as they disappear. With Zabuza beside her, and Haku

watching them both, she turns to the swordsman and punches him in the shoulder.

"You never said anything about her being hot!" she hisses, and Zabuza snorts, rubbing the soon-to-be bruise.

And that's the story of how Ryuishi sorta develops a crush on the future Mizukage.

"Please, *please* tell me you aren't here for the reasons I think you're here."

The familiar voice comes somewhere from behind him in the sprawling warehouse and he very narrowly resists the urge to pinch the bridge of his nose. It is only the fact that he is wearing a porcelain mask, and that he really should have seen this one coming that stops him from doing so.

Beside him, his kōhai is not so lucky, and he cradles his ANBU mask in his hands, because this woman is absolutely ridiculous and sometimes too exasperating to be real.

"Watanabe," Kakashi sighs, turning to face their unexpected guest, who squats among the rafters above them. "Tell me you aren't smuggling drugs now."

She doesn't answer, only quirking one perfectly plucked eyebrow, because of *course* she smuggles drugs sometimes. Most of the time she doesn't, because it reminds her a bit too much of her old life, but where there is cash to be made and power to grab, she is there, doing both.

She actually dips her fingers into a lot of pots these days. At twenty-three, she's got her fingers in just about every business imaginable, and that includes some probably skeevy and remarkably sketchy crime rings.

She tries to keep it mostly clean, but the Mumei have never been what one would call upstanding citizens. Sure, there are tons of legitimate, above board things she does, but there are also smuggling rings, sex industries, information syndicates, bounty collection agencies, and occasionally assassination specialists she deals with.

To be fair, she crushes every human trafficking organization she runs across with a particularly gleeful amount of spite. She also has a special place in her heart filled with hatred for brothels dealing with forced prostitution or underage sex workers. She has yet to leave one she finds still standing. Some might ask, *Why are drugs okay but not slaves?* To which she would answer, *No junky forces you to get high with them.*

She isn't forcing people to take the weak ass, lame as fuck drugs they have in this world, and she hasn't introduced new recipes either. Hell, she doesn't even help smuggle them that often.

"Well, one of us is gonna have to leave. I can't be seen with you," she drawls, and really, she means it. It does her heart good to see them more than the twice to three times yearly jaunt she makes to hang out, but she is under Orochimaru's scrutiny. She doesn't want to look like she's having underhanded dealings with Konoha.

Zabuza and Haku are in the inn across town as well, and she doesn't think that meeting would go down well either.

"Aren't you supposed to be a regular jounin these days anyways, Hatake?" she asks.

"I don't even want to know how you know that," he responds. It's a lie, of course. He would probably kill to get his hands on her sources.

"He failed his team again," Tenzō informs her wearily, having turned to face her.

She snorts, because no surprise there. Hatake Kakashi would make a wonderful and terrifying drill instructor, but never in her life would she trust him with young teens. Just look at what he did to Tenzō.

"Well, if we're asking personal questions, what about the rumors that the Ningyo has a new team?" Kakashi asks, and he watches her stiffen almost imperceptibly.

"True, but not the reason you need to go," she states, a little coldly.

Kakashi feels almost... hurt. It certainly explains why she's been so scarce these past years, but it feels a little like rejection. He wants to scold himself, because she's a missing-nin, and of course she wouldn't include the two of them in her illegal activities. Yet, he wonders about her new team. Are they treating her correctly? Do they make sure that she doesn't work herself to death, and are they guarding her back when they run into opposition?

"Stop the operation, and we can leave," Tenzō answers, and she blows her bangs out of her face in exasperation.

"Seriously, you guys?" she asks with an eye-roll.

"It's immoral and wrong. These are going to hurt people," Kakashi tells her, aiming for her conscience.

For a moment he thinks he succeeded, but then he recognizes that her silence isn't guilt, it is rage. Her eyes widen, her nostrils flare, and for a moment she looks absolutely furious. Then it is gone, her expression smoothed out and emotions smothered away.

"Well, when Konoha or the Land of Fire tells me I'm being fucking immoral, they must be right," she drawls. "After all, it's not like they are the exact same people who keep medical advancements and pharmaceuticals to themselves, or divvy them out to only higher political allies, costing thousands of lives because they won't share treatments. Or the same people who leave allies in a depression so they have to rely on the goodwill of the Land of Fire, or partake in

political espionage while at the same time proclaiming how trust and teamwork are their founding virtues."

Kakashi winces at the barbed but truthful words, and even Tenzō tenses.

"I'm not the only hypocrite in this warehouse," she states flatly. "Don't try and take the moral high ground when we're all grey here."

Sometimes, he thinks that Watanabe should have been born a noble instead of a criminal with political ties. She's very good at finding weaknesses and debating emotional topics logically. Then he remembers her moral dubiousness and her ability to cut down opponents in a ferocious manner, and thinks that they have enough trouble with her as it is.

"Anyways," she singsongs, her mood changing at the flip of a switch. "It's really good to see you two, and I'll even stop this operation because I'm not a heartless bitch." Plus, it's already been compromised, so they should probably start over anew. The product that has crossed the border already is enough for now.

"Thank you," Tenzō replies, ever the mediator. "Your mood and state of health seems much improved from when we first met."

It's about as big as a compliment as one can get from the Mokuton user, and she feels touched. It's his equivalent of a, *Haven't seen you in a while, you look good.*

"Aw, thank you, Wood Boy. You look taller and more kickass yourself. I'm sure you'll surpass your senpai any day now."

Kakashi carefully does not sulk as his kōhai stands straighter and seems to preen at the praise. The day that boy surpasses him, he had better be six feet under the ground. Watanabe is just complimenting him because she finds the younger man aesthetically pleasing.

"So that's it, then?" he asks, trying to figure the situation out. Every time she's involved it takes far more effort than usual.

"Hell, don't sound so disappointed," she states, leaping agilely from her spot in the rafters to land in front of them in a rush of displaced air. "The board is almost set, and the players are assembling," she finishes with a smirk.

"Please tell me that you don't have something insane and possibly abhorrent planned," he deadpans.

She nudges him with her hip none too gently, a playful smile stretching across her face. "If I do, it's only because I'm retaliating or attempting to limit the amount of damage somebody else would be doing."

He sighs as she steps over to throw her arms around his shoulders, and he submits himself to the hug he knows will occur. She always seems to leave after embracing them these days.

"Seriously though," she states as she draw his unresponsive body near, her voice louder because of it's position by his ear. "You guys are my friends, and even if it looks like I'm doing messed up shit, I swear that one day I'll tell you the reason."

He catches her scent, pear blossoms and seawater mingling with the irony tang of blood, and he sighs, because that sounds very ominous. He doesn't exactly trust her to do anything but be her confusing self, but she stepped down here tonight, and he knows if they try to take her in it will become far more effort and life threatening than it needs to be.

She lets him go, and turns to throw her arms around his kōhai, who embraces her back like the traitor he is, making Kakashi look worse for not doing the same.

"Next time we meet I want information on Ishi, and the Stone Daimyo," he states, because he should be getting something out of

this and she has the best information network around. She also tends to drop huge amount of it with them when they do meet, so he wants something interesting.

"Maybe you should just take a better look at the information I already give you," she snarks.

"I'm serious, Watanabe."

A hand leaves the hugging duo and contorts itself into a rude gesture, but that's basically how she acknowledges his requests, and he's almost certain she'll remember it.

Until then, the he just has to deal with this headache she gave him and the Hokage speculating for hours about the possible motives of their renegade informant.

Otogakure finds its place among the Five Great Nations the same way the Land of Rice grows crops.

It starts out as a seed, small and insignificant, ignorable, but as it takes in numbers of ninja over the years it grows, and it becomes impossible to step away from, a vine weaving it's way through the continents, or a snake wrapped around it's prey.

With Orochimaru's recruitment of missing or exiled ninja, alongside his training of a younger generation of stolen, lost, or abandoned people, the fighting force builds. Rather than waste lives and resources by eliminating all threats, many are indoctrinated and become part of the force they once fought against, wrangled in by a better quality of life and the Snake Sannin's special brand of charisma.

He turns the Daimyo into his puppet, somehow, someway. Rice makes non-aggression treaties with Lightning, Wind, Earth, and most importantly, with Fire. As it is a political matter among Daimyo, it

goes above the Kage's heads, and there can be no statement of war. Missions, of course, but no invasion sized forces from any side.

This is what it was in canon. That is why Konoha never destroyed Otogakure.

With Ryuishi working beside him, crop production of the country doubles, prices momentarily drop, and neighboring countries snap up the deals. As the main producer of most staple crops, Kumo, Suna, Iwa, and Konoha subsidize a large portion of their entire diet by the rice, soy, and various vegetation that the Land of Sound produces. It's the product of years and years worth of work, built on the undeniable fact that people must eat.

So why shouldn't they eat the food that Ryuishi's people grow?

Not only that, but Sound fits in several niche markets as well. With the higher education in their population, they begin to produce a surprising amount of authors on various subjects, and the creation of fiction and fantasy literature sets the world on fire, capturing the imaginations of many. As the older numbers of sex workers from the Mumei begin to retire, they start to find income in creating things specifically for the job they left. Aphrodisiacs are produced, lingerie is invented, lubes are created, and the quiet market dealing in all things perverted and sexual begins to rise.

The fact remains though, that most countries are dependent on the crops that Sound provides, and accompanied by a respectable fighting force, Oto becomes one of the major players in politics and trade. It is more than hidey holes spread across the continent and laboratories of dubious nature, it is a country. It is something that they created with their own two hands, with diverse facets of trade, skilled and educated laborers, and it's very own place of learning open to all people to attend.

It is twelve years worth of politicking. Twelve years worth of restructuring the farming standards of this country, of networking between civilian and ninja alike. It's twelve years of setting up trade

routes, checking on merchants, collecting taxes, establishing a reputation, scouting cities, researching histories, and building relationships. It is the birth of a new generation, the coming of age of another, and the retirement of some. It is half of Orochimaru's life spent plotting, and it is all of her own spent preparing. It is their blood, their sweat, and even their tears.

Which is why she won't let anybody, not even her business partner, ruin it.

"No," she states again.

"You are not the one to tell me what and what I cannot do," he hisses, towering over her. She feels the threat looming in his golden eyes, and the rage pulsing just beneath his pale skin. His power is far, far greater than her own, but she won't back down.

"An invasion of Konoha using Suna and our own forces would cripple us," she snaps back, afraid but not cowed by him. "Our income relies on our established neutrality and the quality of our goods. You will ruin everything if you spark this war."

" *Your* income," he rasps, and she snarls at him from across the table.

" *My* income," she agrees, "That supports *your* research, and *your* forces, and *our* village."

"This opportunity cannot pass," he argues, and she barely restrains herself from screaming in challenge, because he will crush her like a bug. The tension is so thick she can taste it, and her anger at him boils in her veins.

"Then kill your teacher," she growls, "And charm the Uchiha brat if you can, but do not drag this nation into your own personal affairs, Orochimaru! A full scale invasion has too many variables involved, and it fosters animosity and distrust not only with Konoha, but every one of our traders and civilians. 'When are we next?', they will

wonder, 'What is to stop them from preying on us?' They will tear us apart if they join together in their mistrust."

She sneers, and she wants to condemn him for all he has ever done. She can't take him physically, but her words have always been her sharpest tools.

"Stop being so ruled by your emotions. You know your targets, and the general population is not fucking one of them."

Her words cause him to reel back as if slapped, and his eyes narrow at her dangerously. She can see the exact moment he thinks about cutting her open and making her scream for her words against him.

"This is the thanks I get," he hisses, his voice dangerously low, "for all the favours I have granted you?"

"This is me stopping someone I respect from acting foolishly," she bites out. "This is me halting someone who helped make me who I am from making a choice that could ruin everything he ever worked for in a fit of shortsightedness."

His eyes seem to stare into her damn soul, but she couldn't give less of a fuck. If he does this, every dream they had, every moment they shared, it is over.

"You built me up when I was broken. You took me, and you put me back together. I despise you as much as I love you. For every time you broke my bones, you braided my hair and slept beside me. For every threat you made, we shared a meal together, and I won't let you do this Orochimaru. I won't give up on you," she states, and if it sounds like begging, so be it. He's the closest thing she has to some sort parent, as fucked up and terrible as it is, and she would dislike having to part with him.

Something in his eyes seems to shutter closed, and she can no longer get a read on him as he fixes his posture and seating, but

something in the air settles, and the tension seems to lessen just the slightest degree.

"So much sentiment," he whispers, but there isn't a reprimand in his voice this time. It sounds-dare she say it?-almost pleased. "Even though you know I could cut you down like a stalk of wheat before a sickle, you stand here telling me I'm wrong, not only because of the consequences, but because you ' *won't give up on me* '."

Her face burns with trace amounts of humiliation and shame, because, whoops, there are those words again. They did their job, but man, she already can feel herself wanting to turn into a puddle on the floor. She still thinks he's being a dumbass, and she stands by it, but fuck, she might have come across less horribly lame.

He smirks as she meets his eyes, carefully holding back a pout, trying to act her age. She is a fully grown woman, not a five year old dammit. Silence passes between them in the empty stone room, and she is ridiculously glad Zabuza and Haku aren't here.

"You make a convincing argument," he says finally. "An invasion would be a waste of resources and possibly endanger the structure we have created, nullifying possible growth and and advancements. I will find another way," he tells her.

A weight leaves her chest, and something like victory surges inside of her. The future is going to be different than it was before-for better, or for worse.

AN:SO MUCH PLOT. LOOK AT IT ALL. WE MAY NEVER SEE THIS MUCH EVER AGAIN. Haha, seriously though, I am happy about this timeskip chapter. This is four years summed up, and the next chapter is canon! Whooo! Several POV's, mass changes, crazy nonsense, political schemes, and dick jokes! Seriously though, it was hard work getting here. There is so much important stuff to grasp in here it isn't funny, but most subtly 'Maybe you should just take a better look at the

information I already give you.' And also, DAIMYO ARE ABOVE KAGE. Also, revolutions are never clean. Hell, no change is ever clean. Please pm me if you have an argument on how what the Kusa farmers did makes Ryuishi a terrible person. Or if you want to know more about wtf Orochimaru got up to.

Some people have added me on tumblr, so I answer questions and shitpost there. It's amazing and fun. So far we have tong of stuff answered.

I want to thank my lurkers, and hope they enjoy the read. I want to thank my favoriters and followers for giving me super cool stats. I want to climb up my reviewers like a tree and present them on pride rock like Simba the lion because they are glorious and I am always a slut for reviews. Thank you reviewers.

I want to give the gift of thanks to my beta, blessed be her life, for she is consistent, funny, and inspiring. I would drown her in gifts if I could.

Question: How did Orochimaru charm the noble courts into granting him so much Favor? OR How does Ryuishi hook up with people now that Zabuza is with her?

In Which There are Changes

I do not own Naruto.

Normal has a new connotation for Ryuishi these days. There's so much variation and change that normal is almost meaningless, because there are so many variables to account for in this crazy system. If she had to though, she would admit this day wasn't abnormal.

She wakes up to the sensation of something shoving her insistently, and she attempts to do what she does every time she feels it's too early to join the waking world: she swats whatever it is without opening her eyes, and she cocoons herself in her blankets like a burrito, her whole body consumed by linens. Then, like always, the blankets are brutally ripped away from her body, and eye-searing sunlight rains down on her face. Her pupils dilate to the point of painful, and she lets out a low, dangerous hiss which goes completely ignored.

"Get up," orders Zabuza. He stands there sweaty and shirtless, probably tracking sand all over the damn place. His morning training session complete, and his teammate dutifully woken up, he stomps off to her bathroom to shower.

The clock reads eight am, and Ryuishi curls into a ball for a few more minutes, lamenting her existence and the birth of one Momochi Zabuza.

The sunlight does not fade, and without her blankets it is too cold to fall back asleep, so half dead and groggy as all hell, she crawls from her bed on ungraceful limbs, bleary-eyed and confused. She operates on autopilot as her body starts long before her thoughts catch up, doing a few morning stretches, her joints popping and her muscles protesting. Then, still not awake, she starts downstairs in

search of glorious caffeine to give her a jumpstart, and she goes to cook breakfast for the inhabitants of her house.

Her body moves with a will of its own, setting the kettle to boil for Haku and Zabuza's tea, and starting up the percolator for her coffee. Her hands find the pans as the smell of coffee fills the kitchen. Her brain wakes up little by little, and she considers what to make for breakfast.

This morning she settles on omelettes and rice, and she washes the grains before setting up the steamer and beating the absolute shit out of some duck eggs. The open window allows the sound of the surf to enter the kitchen, and she cooks to the song of the sun and sea. The smell of saltwater and citronella wafts through the air, and she can hear Haku stirring in his room, awakened by the smell of breakfast. And right on time, just as she is setting out plates and filling up cups, the fifteen-year-old boy stumbles out of his bedroom, drawn like a zombie to the dining table, and she can hear Zabuza drifting downstairs as well.

Haku obligingly walks to where she is standing, and she checks his appearance over before pressing a kiss to the crown of his head, which he dutifully takes before sitting down. She herself goes to add cream and sugar to her coffee while the young man tucks in. Then the carton is taken from her hands, and she goes to glare poisonously at the offender, who exchanges the carton for another inside the fridge, handing her the new container wordlessly. Like so many other times before now, she realizes she grabbed the actual dairy milk and not her soy milk, and she grumbles out her thanks to Zabuza. As they eat breakfast, her mind comes back in equal proportions to how much of her coffee disappears into her stomach. It's all strangely domestic.

After she brushes her teeth, showers, and gets dressed, all of that changes. Because there is nothing domestic about their training.

Getting used to a group after so long wasn't an easy feat, and she still struggles with it. She's not the tank of the group like she was

when she fought alone, and she isn't the support that she was in their unit from Kiri. Instead, Zabuza, who ironically has the most experience working in teams because of his status as a hunter-nin captain, directs her around him when they drill. Haku acts as long-range support from cover when necessary, which isn't often.

Her flexibility and dexterity are definitely an advantage in this, because Ryuishi absolutely needs them to do tandem attacks with Zabuza. She learns to perch on his sword mid slice, and slide below his swings to swipe from below. She uses his body as a jungle gym to redirect her attacks and dissipate the force of an opponent's strike. Their timing has to be perfect, and getting it down is a four-year effort.

After stamina runs up the beach and through the mangroves, Haku sets to keeping his perfect aim up by practicing on the two of them, who have to work in sync to deflect hailstorms of senbon from ice mirrors without attacking. It's awful.

Then Zabuza and her create an equal amount of clones, who work in tandem with the boy and his mirrors. They restrict themselves to one art each day. Taijutsu first, then ninjutsu, bukiyutsu, and then their specialties, genjutsu, underwater combat, and stealth ambush. She makes sure to never hit anything but the clones with the genjutsu, and Zabuza does the same when he pops out of nowhere for killing blows. Haku is allowed his full range every time, and it's mostly their clones and the stupid stray bounty hunter and enemy ninja that keeps them in practice because the boy has a soft heart, and a mednin's fighting style. Which is to say it's fast, hard, and precise, but he is young and not near their level quite yet.

They train until the afternoon, then break for lunch and settle down to work. Haku is given lessons on a truly enormous range of subjects, from his favorites in anatomy, medicine, and physiology (scrolls and books courtesy of Orochimaru) to economics, diplomacy, literature, and history. Zabuza picks up his mathematics, chakra theory, and kanji after she shows her writing skills, still terrible after all this time.

("Doctors write like shit too, and really, it's leagues better than where it was. People can read it, so get off my tits, Zabuza.")

"It's sloppy."

"So is your hair and face.")

Depending on the day and who's teaching what, or if it's a rest day, Ryuishi cracks down on the important and never-ending business of running a trade conglomerate, managing an information network, organizing her populations, and being essentially the CEO of a hidden village. Sloppy writing or not, her eyes hurt and her hands cramp constantly when they aren't traveling and doing face-to-face meetings and check-ins. Using summons and hawks, she can keep up from home for a little bit, but the paperwork seems to never end. She hates it.

She hates it *so fucking much* .

She stays up far after she prepares dinner, and usually crashes around three in the morning, if Haku or Zabuza haven't dragged her away to do something else instead, or they aren't traveling.

She looks forward to their jaunts, which happen often. There are many, many, *many* things they are needed for, and when she is traveling, she doesn't have to send in so many approvals, drafts, revisions, outlines, guides, and orders.

In fact, they travel so much she dare says that staying at home is the odd experience. They only come home about every month and a half.

So she lied, this isn't her routine at all.

The blond boy with sun-kissed skin and whiskered cheeks rolls his eyes yet again as he swiftly and skillfully braids the hair in his hands, making sure to catch the occasional flyaways in the silky smooth

strands. After years of helping the okiya workers get ready and learning the major ins and outs of the secret arts of cosmetics and skin care, a braid is nothing to him, especially with hair as well-kept as this. It might be fine, but it is still strong, and there isn't a split end to be seen.

"Seriously Naruto, why won't you tell us how you passed? I know you were having trouble with the clone technique, did you finally pull it off?" asks his fellow blonde, the one and only Yamanaka Ino.

The hair in his hands shifts as somebody to her left nudges her in the ribs, and the heiress grunts on impact. He would sympathize, because Sakura-chan has pointy elbows, but Ino has been harping on about the same thing all day. As their last day together before teams are formed, he wants to not focus on the demon that apparently resides inside his stomach.

... Which really came as a surprise. He's still reeling from the fact that he has *A DEMON IN HIS BELLY, DATTEBAYO. THAT EXPLAINS SO MUCH. THE LAWS ARE DUMB, AND EVERYBODY IS GOING TO HATE HIM-*

He breathes in, and thinks of the Odayaka Oni, his favorite hero from the stories. He was a demon, and nothing stood in his way. He had friends who knew about him, and they liked him all the same.

"Jeez, Ino-pig, just be happy he's here now! That means that we all passed, even if Naruto got dead last," Sakura states primly, and her self-made rival clicks her tongue in her mouth with a huff.

"Hey! It's not my fault tests are really hard to focus on! It's so quiet and boring," he whines in own his defense. It's not that he didn't try. He really, really did, but it was so hard to focus. He did just fine on the practical portions!

"Whatever, Forehead," Ino fires back. "Like I didn't already know that. I'm just trying to gather intelligence here."

"More like gossiping," Sakura mumbles.

"You're all too loud," groans Shikamaru from beside Naruto, his head cradled in his arms, and Kiba, tense and nervous, nods beside him while Akamaru sleeps inside his hood. Choji continues staring stonily ahead, consumed by his nerves.

Many might wonder what, exactly, spurned this unlikely and odd group to become friends, and if one asked Naruto, he would shrug and state, "It just happened." Ino would say it all began with the discovery that all boys were not, in fact, disgusting heathens with poor hygiene, and Sakura would say it started with a shopping trip. Choji would state that Ino just sort of dragged both Sakura and Naruto along one day, and Kiba would tell you his glorious friendship with the group began the day that Naruto created the horrible and vile weapons the class began to know as 'farting smoke bombs'. The resident Nara genius, however, would most likely be able to pinpoint the exact moment the blond joined the group, and it started with a crush.

Naruto's crush on Sakura was a known variable to the shadow wielder. It was obvious from the blushes and heavy handed praise, but it was never meant to be. Sakura and Ino had set their sights on the last Uchiha, and the blond was simply the lame dead last who was a total loser.

Until the day the boy garnered his courage to ask the pinkette out three years ago.

"I think you're smart and beautiful!" he had declared. "Will you be my girlfriend?"

"Ew, no," replied Sakura with a frown marring her pretty face.

The blond had been crushed. It was clear in his sky blue eyes how sad he was, but he had stiffened his back, smiled and backed off. Naruto, who had grown up with men and women who dealt heavily in the sex trade, knew how important the word no meant in this context.

He accepted her answer, and though she had been callous and cruel, he knew that to keep pushing her would be disrespectful. Nobody in the brothel liked the customer who wouldn't take no for an answer. They were the worst kind of people.

Still, rejection hurt, and he felt its sting keenly. But Misaki-nee had advised him that he was still young, and that perhaps friendship was the place to start with this. He needed more than just 'pretty and smart' to build up a relationship. So, Naruto had come back the next week, after the agony of his denial had faded a bit in his ten-year-old mind, and he had asked another question.

"Do you want to go check out the new ninja retail shop near the square?" he had asked. He was curious if they would sell to him, and he had a bit of allowance left from this month. He needed new pants again, because these ones were getting too small.

"With you?" Sakura asked disdainfully, but it didn't matter, because the platinum blonde beside her had honed in with laser precision on the words ' *new ninja retail shop* '.

Yamanaka Ino knew all the best stores in the west district, and there were no rumors of a new one, but as she looked at his face for tells, she knew that he wasn't lying. She would know, her family specialized in interrogation and intelligence gathering, and Ino had been learning about tells since before she could talk.

Which meant this blond bug had found a new store before she had.

Unacceptable.

"We'd love to go," Ino had stated, inviting herself along, because, hello, Yamanaka Ino here. Top kunoichi and best friend of Haruno Sakura, no way she was getting left out of this.

Sakura was dubious, but more assured because her buoyant friend seemed to want to accompany her, and she didn't have to go along with the loser alone. So the duo of girls had traveled behind Naruto

as he led them after school, not to the west district, but the south district, which was where the square was. It was also full of apartments, not stores, so when he turned down a dirty alley and led them through a maze of twists and turns, only to find them standing before the best hidden secret in all of Konoha (in Ino's humble opinion), they were surprised enough to give him a chance.

Never let it be said that Uzumaki Naruto was one to disappoint, because he certainly did not. Naruto, it seemed, had a knack for finding the best deals in the entire village, and knew how to get his hands on just about everything. He wouldn't name his sources, because 'Snitches get stitches Sunshine,' and that was the rule unless somebody was hurt, being bullied, or in need of help.

He also didn't seem to have the strange aversion to the female gender that some young boys had. This was most likely due to his long and amicable exposure to females in general. First with his Fairy-nee, and then Misaki-nee, both who were strong and smart without having to punch people. (Though sometimes he saw Nanami-nee do that, and she had a mean left hook.)

There were men in his life as well, like Tajima-san, Jiji, Iruka, and many others, and they were equally as cool. He never did understand why anybody had cooties. What was cooties? Also, why couldn't Naruto like sewing, and why was it girly? Why was fixing hair a girl thing? The Hyuuga boy in the grade above them had super long hair and he was a boy. He even had a Hi no Kuni specialty brand ribbon like Sakura-chan, and nobody teased him about it.

To which Ino, with her arms full of shopping bags filled with delightfully fashionable and labor resistant outfits, said, "Does he really?"

Sakura, with a smaller bag of nail polish asked, "Wait, the Hyuuga boy?"

"Yah, his name is like, Weji or whatever," Naruto answered.

Thus, a strange trio was born.

Sakura, Naruto, and Ino did not hang out all the time, but they didn't slack either. Naruto knew that people didn't like him, especially older ones, and that not everybody was accepting of what his Nee-chan's and Nii-san's did. Ino and Sakura were nice girls, but they weren't orphans, or akasenko like him.

Sometimes they would get together and sneak around when he wasn't playing pranks-er... creatively practicing his traps and training his ability to escape pursuers... and they would talk or play, or train. They only trained sometimes, and when asked why Sakura had said, "It's hard, and sweaty, and dirty."

To which Naruto had said, "What does that matter when someone is trying to kill you? Looking good is great, but if you don't train, then you won't be strong, and then an enemy can kill you."

Both of the girls faces had flooded white with shock, then indignity. They had both screamed and they fought, but then Ino came around three days later with Sakura to where Naruto was eating his lunch by himself.

"My dad has a scar on his thigh," she whispered to them both. "He said he would have died if it wasn't for Uncle Shikaku. He said he wasn't fast enough, but he trained and got better."

Naruto had nodded, because he didn't really understand the point of this story, but he was very glad they were talking to him again.

They trained more after that, though. Which was good, because Naruto learned more in training than in the classroom. Even with Sakura helping him study during lunch, he just couldn't figure it out sometimes.

Then there was that whole thing about Sasuke, and Naruto was so done with them. Sasuke didn't even look at them! He was a jerk, with his cold eyes and his holier-than-thou attitude! He thought he was so

cool just because he could learn things super fast and was maybe a little bit strong! He was... he was... he was an *asshole* !

Yet the girls were being so cruel over somebody they didn't even talk with, and Naruto hated it.

"This is STUPID!" he had shouted, "You two are best friends, and you can be rivals or fucking whatever over that bastard, but that doesn't mean you have to hate each other! I didn't come here to train by myself!"

Then they had looked at him like they hadn't ever thought of it like that, and things changed a little bit. Sakura kept the ribbon, and she kicked Ino in the belly, and then Ino punched her in the chest, and then it was a fight like it should have been all along, and Naruto joined in because he could. They were friends again, and rivals, and Naruto couldn't be more pleased, because family meant no one was forgotten, and he wouldn't let the two of them forget why they were family in the first place.

Then came the others, and they were wary. Sometimes Ino's dad looked at him weird when he came to get her, and he made sure to never meet Sakura's parents. Choji's mom seemed to dislike it at first, but then Shikamaru, Kiba, Choji and him started a mud fight, and then it was okay or something? Naruto doesn't know, but people seemed to relax after that.

"Done," Naruto states, coming back out of his memories and tying off Ino's hair in front of him.

"I wonder what teams we'll be on?" asks Kiba, blessedly changing the subject.

"I hope we get cool teachers," Naruto comments, and Sakura nods in agreement.

Whatever happens next, Naruto knows he's one step closer to his dream. He's a ninja now, and he's going to be the best there ever

was.

Ryuishi flinches as a fist connects solidly with her kidney, and she jolts out of her daydreams with a start.

"Zabuza, what the fuck?!" she exclaims, twisting to look back at the hulking twenty-six year old, rubbing her back gingerly.

He grunts and doesn't answer her, because he's an asshole. Seriously, uncalled for. It's not like anything is going to be dangerous anytime soon, other than, you know, the general danger of being a duo of missing nin with a non-aligned apprentice/little brother/son.

"Seriously," she demands. "What is your damage?"

He glares at her in the manner she has come to label as 'you know what you did', or 'Zabuza's intimidation face number eight'. After four years of cohabitation, she's gotten fairly knowledgeable about his new-found expressions and habits

It wasn't easy. Ryuishi was alone for far, far too long. She realizes that now, because hindsight is twenty-twenty, but she had spent so long isolated, she was still dealing with the repercussions. Even after the years Orochimaru pierced her back together and kept her in his hideouts and she got her own house, she never stopped spending most of her time alone. She spent whole weeks without talking, or days without seeing anybody. All the time spent going from destination to destination, the nights in her rooms, or the days at her house. When she did meet people, it wasn't genuine. It was... it was only showing pieces herself, always scared of being caught, or found out. Always running, and always hiding, keeping secrets and doing business. Don't get her wrong, she is still kind of like that, but now there is people who she knows will stick with her unless she really fucks up badly.

Still, living with two people suddenly after years spent alone was easier said than done. First of all, it was almost impossible to find

time to masturbate, because everyone in the house was literally a ninja. Apparently, they all had super hearing. Which, she only discovered after the fact Zabuza confronted her after her shower with a long, hard stare.

Embarrassing didn't even begin to cover it.

Secondly, her stuff was no longer just her stuff. She first came to this realization when Haku accidentally blunted one of her kitchen knives, and she had almost cried at the state of the blade. Not only that, but living with others was apparently some sort of communist bullshit where everything belonged to everyone. All her shampoo kept disappearing, her socks went missing, her razors were used, her food was eaten, and so help her god, if she ever found out which one of them broke her favorite brush-

Well, it wasn't easy.

Still, the sounds of footsteps in her home and a face to greet her in the morning iss strange but welcome most of the time. Hearing a voice other than her own when traveling iss oddly relieving.

She's twenty-four, and it feels strange to say that, because she died before she was this old in her past life. She never thought she would make it anywhere near this age, or that she would pick up so many people that she cares so much about after having lost everything. Even more bewildering, she never thought that people would care about her. Yet, she has Zabuza, and Haku. She is... she is loved in return.

She'll never get over the loss of her old family, but her new one helps remind her that there is still love in the world to be found.

(If only a certain shark would come home, maybe she would feel complete again.)

"Perhaps," rings out Haku's lyrical and deepening voice, interrupting her thoughts, "he is checking to see if you are a water clone like last

time."

She cocks her head around Zabuza to take in the fifteen year old and scowls at him. He's as beautiful as he was when he was eleven, and working admirably through the changes that puberty is wreaking on his body. Haku smiles calmly at her.

Ryuishi thought she would never get over how very much Haku reminded her of her sister in her past life by mannerism alone, and sometimes it still hurts her. She came late in the game, but Zabuza and her raised this spoiled teen, and he was theirs just as much as her sister had been hers.

"Excuse you, Haku," she states calmly. "That water clone was there for a reason."

The boy nods agreeably, but the action rings false and shallow. "Yes, to distract us both from the fact you had gone to deliver a missive alone again. It was a very good distraction," he admits, and the sheer amount of shade this boy is casting with a smile on his face is staggering.

"Looks like somebody wants to practice their taijutsu with me," Ryuishi singsongs, ignoring the truth behind his statement.

The smile on Haku's face practically melts off, and he looks to Zabuza for help, his wide eyes begging. The boy has a natural aptitude for speed and throwing weapons like senbon, shuriken, and kunai, but his hand-to-hand and melee weapon skills are lacking. Not to mention that besides his bloodline limit, he refuses to learn any ninjutsu or genjutsu besides some medical bullcrap.

"I'm sure Zabuza-sama can train me," he states, and Zabuza nods, but she shakes her head.

"But you were so worried that I went off alone, don't you want to spend time together?" she asks pitifully, but the teen shakes his head. Not like that, he doesn't.

"You should have taken us," Zabuza accuses gruffly, and she rolls her eyes, because she can't take them *everywhere* . It's not like she can shrink them down and put them in her bag to make sure they don't start fights or get hurt.

"You don't even like the guy, so why are you harping on about this?" she asks.

He doesn't answer at first, instead he reaches out and grabs the fingers she had been tracing over the scar tissue on her neck. His own callused finger runs down the hollow of her throat and the ridge of raised, discolored flesh.

"He gave you that," he tells her. She can't help but swallow at the intensity of the conversation. The dude punched her in the kidney not five minutes ago! It shouldn't be possible to go from kidney punching to gruff sincerity and intense eye contact in that short amount of time.

Haku watches them both and crosses his fingers the same way he has since he first heard the story of the Rakki Ryu and Odayaka Oni. He resists the urge to pray under his breath, because it's been four years, and things looked bleak, but then there were times like these. Times when they would look at each other so intimately, standing so close, like they were the only people in the world, and Haku had *a/ways* hoped-

"Zabuza, when did you eat garlic? I can smell it on your breath through your mask," Ryuishi states suddenly. The two pull apart slightly, crushing Haku's hopes yet again.

Ryuishi shrugs and lets the awkward moment flow right past her, because lingering on them is weird. Too much stuff needs to be done. Important stuff. Stuff like making sure the Odayaka Oni and young Haku finally get some good press helping with the annual flooding going on in River, or that Wave is still building that bridge which will make trading with the new regime in Kiri about a thousand times easier.

One might ask, " *The bridge, Ruuishi?*" To which she would answer, "Yes that fucking bridge."

Wave is... different now. In fact, a lot of countries are different. A complete economic overhaul will do that, and revolutions in farming and education will definitely do that.

The Fall of Kiri and the rise of Otogakure have shifted just about everything. For starters, while Wave isn't under her control, it isn't a poor shithole either. After Kirigakure faced such startling destruction in its home, it pulled out of the Third Shinobi War earlier than most countries to focus on the repairs that needed to be done. The Mumei striking out against the city inspired more than she thought it would, and not exactly in a good way.

Civilians were both afraid beyond coherence and enraged by the amount of work keeping up the war efforts took, and in canon, that fear and anger would have been aimed at the clans alone. But after she left, according to Zabuzza, it was aimed at the ninja in general, with special emphasis on the clans. Not only did the remaining Kaguya attempt a coup, but many Hōzuki and Yuki joined with them, only to be struck down by the people they once fought side-by-side with. It wasn't pretty by all accounts, and civilians even joined in, and they weren't picky about their targets. It was a sort of short civil war, or rather, it was a sort of violent and bloody anarchy that cost many lives.

The shinobi-better trained, better armed, but fewer in numbers-cracked down. It was the old regime all over again, but Kiri had lost manpower, money, and resources. In an effort to gain those things back, there was a movement to harness the harvesting power of their ships, and an increased range for the hunter-nin to collect bounties both legally and under the table. The ships tried to increase trade range and fishing abilities, and they were successful to an extent. Lightning, Wind, River, and Wave's port cities saw an influx of goods to an extent, and it boosted them up.

Wave, which was basically just a group of large island ports, gained much. It also gained Gatō, a trade conglomerate who attempted to horn in on the trade available and line his pockets with the profits of the smuggling business. Drugs, booze, poor quality weapons, and most despicably of all, people. Only Gatō wasn't very clever, and he thought his biggest enemy was the populace at large. He hired common thugs and bandits from the continent to protect his goods, and he hired in numbers. Bandits and thugs the encroaching hunter-nin picked off like low hanging fruit, because even their measly warrants or bounties were something to bring back to the empty coffers of Kiri. When Gato fled Wave with a small percentage of his goods and tried to move into River to start again... well, he was out of his league.

The Land of Rivers was patrolled by squads of Kiri clan mothers and children (who weren't really kids at this point anymore. Most were actually teens, or even approaching adulthood). They witnessed him attempting to glom off of their profits with a shady work ethic and two-bit thugs, ignoring the system already in place. The remnants of the noble clans were furious because this disrespectful little man thought he was anything at all when he broke the most basic of their founding laws.

People aren't cargo, every Mumei agreed with that.

They acted as they should, and Gato and his forces were wiped clean. She was only informed later.

Ryuishi was indirectly responsible for Gato's untimely death, which gave her no small measure of glee when she found out. More than that, she also appropriated his meager supply of goods into her own business and made enough cash to give to the human trafficking victims so they could go where they pleased.

So, long story short, Wave wasn't a Mumei stronghold because no Mumei wanted to be that close to the Land of Water. In the past years it had been infested with hunter-nin, but as Kiri shifted in anticipation of a Kage change, they had receded a bit. Gatō was

dead and not her problem, and while Wave wasn't exactly rich, it wasn't super poor either because of the trade Kiri gave it after it fell. They were building a bridge in an effort to increase trade with the continent, an effort Ryuishi supported one hundred percent. Ease of trade meant less profit lost in transit.

Finally, and probably most importantly, Team Seven (if it even formed) would never be sent to Wave to protect Tazuna because Gatō was dead. Zabuza and Haku would not die together and be buried far from home with only one another's corpses for company.

(Not to mention that the Mist rebellion didn't need funding. She was already doing that.)

Insert cheering and celebration, accompanied by the overwhelming relief that Ryuishi had finally, *finally* prevented something horrible from happening to the people she loved. Which, really, was her whole main goal in life, as sickeningly selfish as that is.

"Anyway, are you dorks ready to get moving?" Ryuishi queries, shifting her mind from the topic. She feels electricity under her skin, that bubbling need to travel. Good PR isn't going to make itself, and she's been putting this off for far too long. Keeping up good relations in the countries the Mumei most heavily populate is just good business. It gives the people a strong, positive image of their leader helping them personally when they need it. For Zabuza and Haku, it will establish them in their place by her side in a beneficial light. She needs to reinforce the idea that they there to help, that they connect with the everyday citizen, and that they aren't ignorant to the problems faced by locals. Her system works because people want to work for her, and she provides for them. It is loyalty and respect earned, not demanded.

Digging troughs and redirecting water may seem like grueling, dirty work, but it is supposed to be, which is what makes people so thankful when they help out.

While she is ecstatic with the ongoing activities in Wave, it is a situation that simply needs to be checked. It's not like hanging around the construction site for the bridge is going to help anything, and Ryuishi is superstitious. They died there once. They won't get the chance to again. Besides, the annual preparations for the swelling waterways in River is something that needs hands-on assistance if she wants to see benefit from it.

Not only that, but there is a long history of bandits and criminals taking advantage of this time to raid while the rest of the country is distracted. If there happens to be an attack that Ryuishi and Zabuza can fight off, it's almost even better because they are seen defending the populace.

(Not Haku though. Haku isn't allowed to fight, he doesn't need to fight. His hands are clean while theirs are already dripping with blood. He can be witnessed assisting the wounded and sick.)

"Yes, Ryuishi," Haku answers gratefully, if not a bit sullen.

"You sure? You packed everything this time? Got your senbon, your bandages, your med kit, and your extra underwear?" she asks, recalling a past incident.

The boy flushes crimson and nods silently, tugging on the ends of his hair, but Zabuza shoves her forward, distracting her from her thoughts.

"Stop mothering the boy," he grunts.

"Don't give me that shit," she states scathingly, heading out. "Like I haven't caught you fixing his hair or correcting his stance a million times."

" *Stop talking.* "

"I'll stop talking when you start accepting that you are the biggest mother hen in this house, Momochi Zabuza!"

The trio starts forward, and the journey to River will begin with many, many stops along the way to check up on localized pockets of Mumei and monitor the caravans and suppliers, eating up time. It's a system that began a while ago, but Haku couldn't be happier as he watches his two caretakers bicker and grapple in front of him. They are his family, more than the remaining Yuki clan are, and he wouldn't trade them for the world.

Ryuishi dances into the mangrove swamp, filled with seawater from high tide, and her feet barely bend the thin roots as she slithers between them. Haku knows this to be the hard-won grace from years of practice and experience. Even Zabuzza cannot emulate the ease of which she appears to glide around the complex tangles of wood. Instead, the larger man leaps up with surety on the thicker branches and waits for Haku to take his place in the center of their file formation, the best defended position. The most protected.

He jogs over to his place and take one more deep breath, letting the smell of saltwater, sand, sunshine and vegetation fill him. It is the smell of home, and it will linger on them for some time to come like a promise to return.

By some unspoken order, the three move.

Hatake Kakashi stares balefully out at the genin arranged in front of him on the rooftop in the academy, and he knows deep in his soul that he's boned.

The three hopefuls stare back at him with varying degrees of distrust and distaste that make him feel simultaneously annoyed and exhausted. When he was young he would never wear such blatant disrespect so plain on his face when approached by a superior. Granted, when he was younger he also was a stickler for the shinobi rules, but that didn't change the fact that he also wasn't so obvious about disliking someone higher-ranking.

"So," he starts, memorizing their features, his stomach sinking into his sandals. "Tell me about yourselves. Likes, dislikes, hobbies, dreams for the future."

Not that he doesn't already know everything on their files front to back, but the way a person speaks can be telling, just like their body language.

Haruno Sakura, age twelve. Stubborn and well-educated, with a tendency to learn things clinically and memorize them. Good with theoretical knowledge but poor in execution. The type of person who enjoys riddles for some reason, and also wears her hair far too long and loose for an inexperienced ninja.

Uchiha Sasuke, age twelve. Distant and blunt, very good in taijutsu and even more promising in ninjutsu. Has a complex about being ignored or implied worthlessness that leads to cold, standoffish behavior and fits of rage. The last Uchiha in Konoha, and stubbornly proud.

Finally, Uzumaki Naruto, also age twelve. Tenacious, showboating, and filled with the desire to never give up. Poor test scores on paper, mediocre in practicals, but shows large amounts of stamina and instinct. Foul-mouthed at the best of times, and the spitting image of his father.

This team is like a sucker punch to the gut, specifically targeted to hit him right where it hurts the most.

"Sensei, would you demonstrate for us? Just so we know how it works," requests the blond boy. Kakashi resists narrowing his eye at him. What a flippant dig for information.

"Me? Well, I'm Hatake Kakashi and I like... well. What I dislike is none of your business, my dreams for the future... never really thought about them. I have lots of hobbies," he drawls and he can see the pink-haired girl exchange an irritated whisper with the boy, who nods enthusiastically, a scowl on his face. Co-conspirators,

most likely. Even the Uchiha boy, distant at the best of times, nods along with the quiet words.

The potential for a team is already there, he can see it. There may be trouble due to preconceived notions and the stubbornness that seems to permeate their personalities, but it might work. Maybe.

He withholds a sigh. He isn't fooling anyone. It might work, and there's already a history of it working. His own team shared many traits with this one, and they performed well together. Not only that, but the political pressure on him to pass this team is extreme. The jinchuuriki has to become a ninja, and the last of the Uchiha does too. Even Sakura needs to pass with the recent pressure from the civilians for more equal class representation among the ranks.

Still, it is his choice, and he can fail them all. It's his right as a jounin.

"Blondie, go," he orders, quietly frustrated.

"I'm Uzumaki Naruto! I like ramen, and training with friends. I dislike the time it takes to cook food, and pushy customers. My hobby is eating different kinds of ramen, and my dreams for the future are to protect my friends, help my fairy, and become Hokage, dattebayo!"

There are so many things wrong with that statement Kakashi doesn't even know where to begin. First of all, how much time does this kid spend on ramen? Second of all, why do rude customers bother him? Is there a story behind that? Thirdly, a fairy? Has the boy adopted some sort of stray?

The dark-headed youth beside him snorts, but doesn't ignore the statement, and the lone girl rolls her eyes as if she has heard this too many times already.

"Pinky," he drawls, and he can feel the headache beginning behind his eyes as she blinks and looks at him.

"Haruno Sakura! I like learning and, uh-" here she casts a none too subtle glance at the Uchiha, who glares back at her, "-er, well. My hobbies are reading, and spending time with friends, and competing with Ino-pig. My dream for the future is..." Cue another glance towards the Uchiha boy.

*Subtlety, thy name is **not** Sakura*, Kakashi thinks. May the gods help save him from pubescent genin in the grips of hormones. What is it about them that makes it so... unappealing to him? He was a late bloomer, and he never truly felt the sort of crushes that he has seen others go through. He's glad for it too. It looks awful.

"What do you hate?" he prompts, and the girl's nostrils flare as she balls her fists.

"Losing to Ino-pig!" she declares loudly, and this time Naruto rolls his eyes at her declaration. There seems to be a third party missing from their duo, or even more than that, but the rivalry between the girls is a good thing. At least it will help with motivation.

"Last one," he states, and the Uchiha boy is all brooding and intense glaring when the attention is turned on him.

"My name is Uchiha Sasuke," the child begins. "I like very few things. I dislike many things, but mostly people who ignore other people, and coming home to a messy apartment. My hobby is training, and my dream for the future isn't a dream, because I will make it a reality. I will restore my clan and confront a certain man."

What a group of healthy and well-rounded individuals, he ponders to himself sarcastically. Certainly nothing could go wrong in this group. Especially not the dark-haired boy with such ambiguous goal. How exactly is he going to restore his clan? Also, what sort of confrontation? A fight, a strongly worded conversation? Some sort of intervention?

"When is your apartment ever messy?" Naruto asks curiously, as if that is the statement he is most concerned about.

The Uchiha turns on him like a rabid dog, his glare murderous and his scowl intense. "I don't know, *dobe* . When is the last time you put a paint bomb in it?" he snaps.

"Ahahaha... was that your apartment, jackass?" the blond replies with a false sense of sheepishness. "I couldn't tell. It certainly didn't seem like it belonged to an uptight jerk."

"Naruto!" Sakura chastises loudly.

"I'm going to beat you into the ground," the boy bites out, and there is no denying the ache inside Kakashi's skull now.

The boys lunge at one another while the pink haired girl stands exasperated and annoyed on the sidelines, having quickly removed herself from the center of the conflict. There is a practiced sense to the action, as if this isn't the first time she has had to perform such a maneuver.

This squad seems like what Watanabe would call 'a hot mess.' Less than a day in there is strife, and it looks like the two males only need a slight provocation to start beating on each other, and the female is torn between friendship and adoration. He bets Asuma doesn't have to deal with this sort of conflict. Give him a tricky Nara, a fashion-conscious Yamanaka, and amicable Akimichi any day. Their teamwork is bound to be good. Even Kurenai's team will be better balanced, and it's filled with clan heirs.

Guy is never going to let him hear the end of it either. Not when he was assigned that mess of a squad last year with two taijutsu specialists and a long range support fighter, two that came with overbearing personalities. At least he had a neutral party in the budding weapons mistress to even it out a bit and promote harmony.

Kakashi wonders if there is still a spot open in ANBU for him after all these years. His kōhai certainly would have no qualms about having him back on the team, and ANBU squads are far, far more professional than this. Teaching them is just a matter of establishing

dominance and leading by example. Once those things are completed, it's simply business from there on out.

His only relief is that there is no way these brats will ever pass a the bell test if pitted against one another. They aren't clever enough to figure it out, and even with the pressure on him, if he fails them all, he will have a good reason. It's not like they're magically going to bond under pressure.

(They do pass, and Kakashi wishes the last bits of his peace goodbye. This team is going to take years off of his life. He can feel it.)

AN: SO. Canon. It's sort of fucked up. Naruto had friends, Sakura isn't afraid to get dirty and is focused more on her competition with Ino than Sasuke, and Sasuke is an angry bean who slides between hot and cold, but is attempting to be professional. Kakashi himself isn't even trying with them, because he's so done. Also, Wave is out due to a ripple effect, Haku studied iryo ninjutsu, and Zabuza hates Orochimaru. The missing nin trio is starting a long PR campaign.

Ryuishi, meanwhile, is keeping secrets out her ass, and it's gonna blow up in her face.

SO much going on, I'm having a hard part explaining it all. This chapter might be a little messy, but expect the next couple to be a bit disorienting, because there are many POV to consider. I should also say that much of the socio-political-geographic world has been set up, and I am taking a turn back to interpersonal relationships once more. Less about the world, more about the people. As always, if you have any problems, go ahead and talk to me.

I wanna give a shout out to my lurkers (some of which graced me with none lurker reviews, which was awesome), my favorites, and my followers. I want to go to my reviewers homes

and leave them gift baskets full of really cool shit. Thanks to you, we reached over 4000 reviews, which is banana's.

To my beta enbi; without you this story probably would have died with the last chapter. Thank you for keeping me strong, and giving me food for thought. Bless.

Question: What sort of bullshit did young Naruto and his girl squad get up to? OR Do you think Ryuishi has realized how far she's stretching herself?

In Which a Snowball Begins to Roll

I do not own Naruto.

The verdant green trees and tangling growth on the border of the Land of Rivers, Tani, have always reminded Ryuishi of the Western Ghats of India, if someone threw Japanese stereotypes into them and made them flat. Towering trees are intersped with bamboo that grows in tall clusters, creating odd little forests in all the shades of green a person could imagine through tumbling hills and flatlands. Tangling vines spread out like creeping, leafy tentacles, crawling their way up sturdier growths to reach the top. Sunlight filters through long, thin leaves to fall in speckled patches of gold along the path, and everywhere one goes they can hear the trickling sound of water.

Creeks, brooks, streams, and rivers of all sizes find their way through this country, and they flood annually during the rainy season. The floods wash nutrient-rich soil up onto the land, and it would be good for growing, if the place wasn't so damn wet year round. Water comes down from the highlands of the Land of Rain and the Land of Fire to run into this low land, and then run out into the sea. It's always humid and lush, but it rains consistently through the year, and when she says it has a rainy season, she means there's basically just a few months where it doesn't stop.

The floods eat away at riverbanks. They sweep homes, people, and property away, while damaging roads, buildings, and what little farmland there is. It generally causes an obscene amount of destruction and usually costs a few lives. She has no idea why people continue to rebuild in the same areas, but she guesses it's just human nature.

After all, the same exact thing happened in India with the Ganges, Africa with the Nile, and all of Southeast Asia. In California and Australia, wildfires constantly burned through the same areas time

after time. Earthquakes and tsunamis were known factors to the inhabitants of the Ring of Fire. Humans had a strange tradition of building lives in places they knew for a fact nature had a habit of wrecking.

Nonsensical human nature aside though, it is very picturesque, in that exotic sort of sense. It's alive with the sound of birdsong humming through the air, loud trills and sharp warbling caws. Bugs join in from their unseen places, buzzing and thrumming so hard that the humid air practically vibrates. Distant monkey calls start up suddenly and stop as rival gangs fight for territory.

It's warm, too. How could it not be, so close to the desert? Then again, climate and meteorology make no damn sense in this world. Trying to find the science behind it makes her head hurt, because even though Orochimaru assures her that there is in fact science behind it all, the addition of chakra as a law changes everything she once knew.

She can walk on water for Izanagi's sake. No talk of surface tension or distributed weight can ever make a sixty two kilo woman standing on a lake's surface make sense, but somehow chakra explains it.

Not only that, but she has had enough injuries to cripple her for life, but they haven't. All her cuts, stabs, breaks, dislocations, burns, lacerations, contusions, internal hemorrhaging, and concussions have healed with tons of time and help from Kabuto and the Snake Sannin. They didn't linger, or leave lasting weaknesses. From what she understood of medicine in her past life, that wasn't supposed to happen.

There's also all the blatant elemental manipulation, genjutsu, and bloodline limits. The Yamanaka can literally body snatch people, and read their enemies' minds and memories. The Aburame are fucking filled with bugs, just packed full of them. The Kaguya fight with their bones on the outside. Bones. Outside. Of. Body. The Hozuki turn into liquid for Shiva's sake. Where is their central nervous system

when they are water? How do they even think, or hold themselves together?

Actually, this new reality calls for an amazing amount of suspension of disbelief. Just an incredible amount really. There are no governing rules that make any sense whatsoever. The Daimyo are incompetent, but still somehow in power over ninja, who can literally punch through people. Civilians didn't rebel before she came along, even though they made up the majority of the populace and had the shittiest circumstances. Kage exist as dominant powers, but never really display those powers outside of their village, and she has no idea how they are chosen.

Was there just a contest who see who was the strongest ninja? Was it just accepted by hearsay? The body count?

Ninja bullshit is what all that is.

Watanabe Ryuishi rests her chin lazily, and feels the rhythm of walking jolt her body. It's a nice, gentle swaying motion. It would even be comfortable, if it wasn't for the hard length of steel angled awkwardly in between her thighs.

"Neh, Zabuza?" she asks. "I like piggyback rides as much as the next girl, but your sword is really uncomfortable."

"Kubikiribōchō stays on my back," he tells her gruffly, and she pouts.

"Then can I walk?"

"It's too hot," he grunts, and that is her answer. Apparently, just as he works as her heater, she is his portable, two-legged cooler. Haku works that way too, occasionally putting his bloodline limit to good use and creating ice for his master.

"Man, but you're all fucking sweaty and shit, and every time you take a step I bang into Kubikiribōchō," she whines in her best mewling

voice. Haku sends a sympathetic glance back towards her but does nothing to help.

"Deal with it," he says briskly, and she make a low keening noise in her throat which he is sure to hear, her head resting on his shoulder and all that.

"How are you even carrying me anyway? Like, me, my pack, and my weapon can't be light," she states, but he doesn't really need to answer that. Kubikiribōchō is heavy as shit and he can wield it with pinpoint accuracy, turning it and changing direction on a dime.

He doesn't answer, and she continue making whiny noises like a toddler, because she is a mature, responsible adult. Also, because being pressed again a sweaty Zabuza is gross and he needs to stop. The world should feel bad for her.

"You're the one that said we had to come out here," he responds after a particularly odd chirping, whirring sound leaves her lips. Her broken throat makes it so she can make some really cool noises. The one upside of screaming herself raw at such a young age.

"You need good press!" she insists. "You guys have been with me for years, but you don't get seen by the public a lot. Instead you creep around like I'm ashamed of you."

"More like you won't let us join you inside the Hidden Villages, or stand beside you with that snake," Haku mumbles. "And you say the Mumei won't talk with strangers around, and you won't let me fight..."

"Haku, you know Zabuza could give less of a shit about my networking, and you aren't ready to be doing subterfuge on that level. It's not just hiding, it's acting all the time and adapting to the situation. If you two got caught by a Hidden Village and detained I might actually start a war, plus you would blow my established covers," she reasons.

"You still get to enter the akasen districts, but some of the information they share people would literally kill to wipe out. You don't get to fight because you don't..." She hesitates.

"You're not a killer," Zabuza finishes for her.

She hums, because in that, at least, they are of one mind. Haku still can't watch when she finishes game, and he turns away when the two of them finish opponents. There's a reason Sasuke didn't die in canon on that bridge, and it's because Haku has a thing against killing. He just can't bring himself to finish somebody.

That's fine with them. He can defend himself better than most people, and he's not afraid to fight, but as missing-nin they can't afford the luxury of letting people live. If they leave opponents alive, they can come after them again, or hire better people to do it, or spread information about their whereabouts, or call the bounty hunters. Or they *are* bounty hunters.

Besides, he's mad good at healing. A field medic is worth at least two tanks. There's a reason she hasn't got any more scars since Haku and Zabuza came, and it's not solely because the swordsman is covering her back.

"You still shouldn't go to the snake alone," Zabuza comments, totally ruining the moment.

"Yah, sure. Let me just put you around somebody you hate so you can fucking start fighting with the man who could literally wipe the floor with us. It's really profitable in discussions to wrack up that tension," she says blithely. He seems to relax a bit at this.

"He still struggles with sarcasm sometimes, Ryuishi-sama," counters Haku, and she rolls her eyes.

"I wasn't serious Zabuza, so don't get excited," she bites out.

His response is a tensing of his muscles, and tightening the grip he has on her thighs. What an ass.

Still, she wouldn't have it any other way. She loves them just the way they are.

"I can't do it, man!" Naruto declares loudly in the missions office. His loud voice echoes in the mostly empty wooden room. The few chūnin and jōnin working behind the missions desk, and the ANBU guarding the Hokage all turn to look at the boy.

"I can't babysit another kid, walk another dog, or catch that damn cat one more time! If I wanted to do chores, I would have become a maid, not a ninja!"

"Naruto!" Sakura yells, her arms reaching around to cover his mouth. "That's the Hokage, show some respect," she hisses.

Unknown to them both, Sasuke watches the dead last's antics and agrees. He'd never say what Naruto did, because being so loud is rude and uncouth, but he agrees with the sentiment a hundred percent. He is tired of pedantic, boring missions and barely learning anything at all. In the Academy, there was structure, even if one read ahead. Lessons were planned out, and insightful questions allowed people to absorb things they may not have even thought about. They went over several subjects each day, some that changed week to week, and there was always something to learn with Iruka-sensei.

His new squad is nothing like that.

His team is loud and energetic, and he is finding it strange to spend so much time around such people. Naruto can hardly focus on anything, and when he does, it's with an unsettling hyperfocus. He also has a barbed tongue and hurls insults around like it's his favorite hobby. Sakura often distracts them both with small talk, filling up the silences, or trying to break them up when they inevitably fight.

Before this, he always spent time with Shino, because the other boy was quiet and focused. Shino was studious, he understood Sasuke's need for space, and they both were quiet people. When they did talk, the Aburame always explained things logically and never ignored him. He was a benefit to his clan and Konoha.

Now he's stuck with half of the loudest people in class, matched by only Ino and Kiba in noise production, and it chafes.

Furthermore, their sensei really pisses him off, always showing up late. It's like he doesn't have time to teach them properly, and it bubbles under his skin. Just like *that bastard **didn't have time*** -

He takes a deep breath to calm himself. In, and out.

He would love to smash his fist against his silver-haired sensei, but he is a genin, and as much as the masked man acts like a loser, he's a jōnin, and far too strong. Sasuke's only choice is to get stronger so he can reach his new sub-goal and punch him in the face.

One day, he promises himself silently.

While he's thinking of people he would like to beat down, he's going to add Naruto to that list once again. At this point, he should probably become a full time member of that list. There has never been a bad time to fight with the dobe. The blond always breaks into his apartment and ruins everything, and he is loud and annoying. He's rude and unprofessional, and he doesn't follow any of the shinobi rules. The boy never fails to irritate Sasuke.

Sakura, as well. Even though she started training periodically a few years back, she never got over her infatuation with him. Being who he is, he had told her that he didn't return her feelings, just like he told every one of his fangirls, but they didn't seem to take the hint. It makes him uncomfortable, all those weird emotions and ideas they have. He's not a piece of meat to be eaten, or an object. He has goals he wants to meet. She should focus more on her power, not simply accept slowly getting better.

They're twelve and just starting their careers. There's no *time* for romance.

Naruto escapes Sakura's hold for a moment, his head breaking free of her smothering hand. He gasps for breath like a fish out of water, and their sensei just *lets it happen*.

Sasuke wants to know who promoted this man to jōnin and why.

"Jiji! I'm begging you, give us a real mission!" Naruto pleads.
"Anything other than these chores! Fighting bandits, protecting a princess, taking down an evil empire, anything!"

The old man stares at the boy, and for a moment Sasuke feels like he might witness the wrath of a god. The chūnin and jōnin around him are glaring and watching the Hokage with an expectant sort of gaze. There is suddenly tension in the air that the blond seems oblivious to. The old man watches him calculatingly, and he can hear Sakura swallow, but the moment passes and the honorable Hokage wheezes out a chuckle, expelling smoke from his pipe.

"I suppose," he rasps. "If your sensei thinks you are capable, we *do* have a C-rank here."

"You would know best, Hokage-sama," the jounin defers, and Sasuke thinks it's because even he is tired of stupid missions.

"It a very important mission," the Hokage tells them, tossing the scroll towards Hatake-sensei. Sasuke is not envious when he watches the ease with which the man snatches it out of the air.

He isn't.

"Hell yes, 'ttebayo!" Naruto cheers. "We accept, we accept!"

Sasuke wonders if Naruto even knows the meaning of tact. He sincerely doubts it, but either way, it doesn't matter to Sasuke.

Anything is better than repetitive, glorified chores. He nods to show his acceptance of the mission as well.

Sakura follows the two examples before her, bowing her head in acquiescence, and the deed is done. Whatever this mission is, it *has* to be better than what they have been dealing with lately. Sasuke wasn't made to clean up dog feces. It's not who he is.

"Your team has been hired to assist with the natural flooding in River by the daimyo, who is making an effort to aid his less wealthy citizens."

Sasuke doesn't notice the narrowing of his teacher's eyes, but the Hokage doesn't miss it, and the man nods.

Kakashi bites his tongue. The daimyo of River isn't getting more involved with the population just because he's feeling benevolent. He's feeling the pressure of a foreign influence, and he's trying to make his own appearance better. The noble feels threatened by the discontent and mysterious legend aiding his people, and he should.

There were similar rumors before Rain closed its borders directly north of River, and the still unsteady Grass is another neighbor to them.

It's not a high-level mission, it's very low-grade with almost no chance of fighting, but Konoha is there to represent the established powers reaching out and assisting the populace. Konoha can only benefit from the exchange as well, because they will be the ones directly viewed with the people. If anything goes wrong, they can say they were simply hired to do the job and place the responsibility back on the daimyo's shoulders. This is a publicity stunt, and it's most likely indirectly tied to the Rakki Ryuu.

Kakashi doubts the effectiveness of such plans, but he does not protest the mission. He can keep his ears open, and maybe pick up something good when he's out there. She hasn't visited lately, and

her information has been growing sparse. It's enough to please the Hokage, but Kakashi knows her. Something is changing.

Perhaps it is her new team, the one she refuses to talk about. Despite the fact that she is a missing-nin from a treacherous place like Kiri, the woman has a surprising amount of loyalty to individual people. Maybe there are whispers of who they are, and the next time she shows her face, he will be able to confront her about them.

"That sounds... lame," Naruto whines, dragging Kakashi out of his pondering. Then his student realizes the implications of his own words and quickly backpedals. "I mean, way better than walking dogs! Going to River, heh! That's awesome."

"I do like traveling," mutters Sakura thoughtfully, pressing her index finger to her lips in thought. Kakashi wonders when she has ever had the luxury of traveling to know if she likes it or not.

Sasuke simply nods, because he takes every mission he gets seriously. This isn't playtime. This is a job.

The three of them bow in respect and prepare for their first out-of-village mission, but Kakashi can't help feeling like things will be complicated. Things always get complicated when they involve *that woman* .

Just over the border of Wind and River, two ninja and one civilian on technicality alone (Haku never graduated an Academy or was allied to a nation) stop at an inn for the night.

It's not something Ryuishi is used to in any sense of the word, this stopping while traveling nonsense. It seems counterproductive because she has always simply traveled through the night without pause to reach her destination as fast as possible while leaving the smallest trail available. Get there, get shit done, rinse and repeat.

Apparently her habit of traveling nonstop for days on end was not acceptable behavior to the other two who joined her. It was '*unhealthy to push so hard while intaking such little fluids and nutrients,*' and '*wore out stamina that was needed in case of a fight* .' Haku had nagged about how important resting was and Zabuza had given her an unimpressed face that simply screamed 'you know better', like she was a dog that peed on the carpet instead of a full grown woman making efficient, if slightly self-destructive, life choices.

But *no*, pushing herself to not sleep and keep going was wrong, and apparently there were other ways to travel unnoticed and unpursued. Ways that Zabuza had informed her of, because he had been a big bad hunter-nin and knew so much more than somebody who had been a missing-nin and was evading established forces for *eight* years before he came along.

She had decked him in the stomach for trying to mansplain things to her like a condescending dick, but she had taken his advice anyway. It was practical at that time, because the then eleven-year-old Haku was not a stamina-filled child.

So it was that they had taken up the habit of mixing up their trails so badly people would have no idea what exactly passed through. It was a matter of capturing varying animal and human scents to mingle behind them, and suppressing their chakra usage like crazy so the ambient nature chakra would cover them. It was probably a lot easier in Water Country, where the chakra tended to be dense to the point of unnatural, but it could be done outside of the country with much practice.

So much practice.

It was also easier to not stand out in established settlements, where they could slip around and let other people's chakra and scent cover theirs. Ryuishi is still skeptical about this, because she has no sense of chakra unless it is so thick and crazy it would be super obvious to anybody else. It's an odd defect, especially for a higher level ninja, or

so says Zabuza. According to him, most of the time chakra sense develops naturally with experience, though some people are more sensitive to it than others.

Well, she never said she was perfect. So what if she can't sense chakra signature or see very well. Ryuishi can hold her breath for like, seven minutes, hear a rabbit sneeze from an impressive distance, and she can smell almost as well as Hatake.

In the end, though, the goal here is to make themselves one small target among several hundred, instead of one almost invisible one that doesn't stop moving. So *that* means that they spend a lot more time in hotels, inns, and taverns than in small camps in the wild.

It also makes it far easier to pick up on upsetting whispers when surrounded by so many people, which is why Ryuishi is belly down on one of the beds when Zabuza steps out of the bathroom, muffling her frustrated screams into a pillow while Haku watches on in bewilderment.

"What happened?" intones Zabuza, because this is not a new behavior to him. She's had a habit of shouting into pillows when emotional or stressed for as long as he can remember. She wasn't this way when he went to wash the day's dirt and sweat off of him though, so something obviously triggered this.

The boy shrugs as the grown woman flails her limbs, her fists beating the mattress by her head and her legs kicking up and down. The bed frame emits an ominous sounding squeak every time she strikes too hard, and Zabuza is mildly concerned she may break it.

(Scratch that, after reevaluation, he doesn't actually care about the bed.)

"I don't know," the effeminate boy answers honestly. "She went out to pick up food and talk to some people and came back like this."

Zabuza squints, but he can't see any sign of damage on her, so it wasn't a fight. "Where's the food?" he asks, and Haku lifts his kimono-clad arm to point over to a bag with a knotted top sitting on the night stand.

When he goes over to check out, it looks like beef ribs, and it smells good. The rice is also fine, along with the miso soup and pickled vegetables. Nothing here to be upset about.

He shrugs and makes himself and his apprentice a plate before seating himself on the bed beside the younger male. They watch the lone female of their group go limp and lie corpse-like on the cheap hotel furniture, her face hidden inside the cotton cover of her pillow.

"Did you go with her?" he asks around a mouthful of meat. It's got a good flavour; sweet, salty, and savory all rolled into one. It's much better than some of the takeout he has eaten before on missions. Perhaps there is a trick to picking it out he hasn't learned yet, some sort of secret known only to cooks like his teammate. She seems to be full of secrets these days, it wouldn't surprise him.

"I monitored her from the window," explains Haku. "The restaurant is across the street." So no new clues there.

The swordsman balances his plate in a single hand and lets a rib dangle from his teeth as he leans over to shove her in her side. She grunts at the contact and turns her head to face him, her cheeks made red from the exertion of creating so much noise.

"Speak," he mumbles around the beef.

She thrusts her bottom lip out and her eyes dart over to Haku, then to Zabuza once more, her brow furrowing. "Zabuza, put on some pants, you barbarian."

He simply makes eyes contact with her, because he's wearing a towel, and that should be enough. He doesn't complain when she goes running up and down the beach in that tiny black swimsuit, or

when she steps out of the shower in her towel dress thing. They've never cared about modesty before.

"Good point," she acquiesces at the lingering silence.

Her hands raise up to fist themselves in the neutral blue sheets and she bites her bottom lip, wearing the blank expression that she has when she is thinking about things too hard. A slurping sound fills the room as the youngest member of the trio helps himself to some of the miso.

Zabuza's gaze strays to the dip of her lower back, where her hip-hanging pants have slipped down to reveal more of his mark on her, and her crop top has risen in her flailing. While it usually hangs far enough in the back to hide her unusual markings, for now they are exposed.

He finishes his beef while taking in the line of her spine and bottom of her ribs, examining the strange black serpent bones that wind down to the small of her back. He knows that it trails up to between her shoulders, where it wraps around more animals, and he wonders about them. He himself will forever wear the mark Kirigakure inked into his skin when he became a hunter-nin, settled on his own hip. She has had this for a long time, though, and he remembers the first time he saw it, after the massacre in the hospital.

He wonders who gave it to her, because it has too many fine lines and intricate curves to be the same kind of tattoo elite force wore. It hadn't stretched oddly as she grew, or faded with time and exposure to the sun. It was still just as black and clean as ever. The only thing that had changed was her own skin tone, made darker and richer by her time in the sun.

"There are whispers of rogue-nin," she states finally, and he looks up at her, her face twisted and serious.

"That should be no problem," Haku tells her after swallowing some of the pickled vegetables with his rice. "You and Zabuza-sama work

very well together."

Her brows furrow once more and her lips turn downward into a thoughtful frown. "Their headbands are from Rain," she finishes.

Haku blinks. It makes no difference to him where a threat comes from. They will be eliminated if they interfere or present a danger regardless of their original nationality.

Zabuza, however, furrows his own brows as he begins to link together her distress. Rain closed its borders years ago, no one came in or out that she knew of, and she knew a lot. A number of rogue ninja appearing now means that there has been a lapse in the so far impenetrable security, or that Rain is once again on the move after a long period of silence.

He isn't ignorant about her business, and the fact that it was not her network that informed her, but rumor on the streets is not good news. She has paid special attention to that country for a while now, and he used to wonder why until he asked.

"He's in there," she had said. "Kisame is in Rain. He's part of an obscure group that performed a coup inside the country, and he's surrounded by incredibly strong people, but they are too closed for me to breach. Not even I can get a read on their movements."

Their commander, and the final piece to their trio might be moving soon, and she doesn't know anything about it. He understands her distress now, because he shares her frustration. The unit is strongest when it is together, and Kisame is away from them where they cannot guard his back.

He grits his teeth so hard it snaps the rib bone between them, and the cooked marrow coats his tongue.

"What's so bad about Rain?" asks Haku, and Ryuishi's attention slides over to the young boy on the bed beside Zabuza.

"Haku, do you remember your economics lessons?" she asks, and the young man nods. He's had many lessons from the both of them over the years, from history, to arithmetic, to taijutsu and literature. He's very well educated, by most standards.

"Alright, now take the system we have and throw in an unknown. No motives, goals, desires, or resources known. They've been under lock and key for years, and there might be an influx of goods soon, or a sudden demand, but Rain for sure has ninja. I don't know how to act, or even if I want to, because there is a huge danger lurking inside their borders."

Haku ponders it for a moment. "You're stuck reacting to the choices they make," he says insightfully, and she nods.

"In more than one way. Not mentioning the emotional involvement I have with them, I know for a fact that there is shady things going on. Rain is not very good for agriculture, because heavy precipitation leaches the soil of nutrients, and they don't have the climate to support domesticated animals. I have no idea how they supported themselves all these years without trade, because they mostly mined and manufactured goods. Again, they have ninja, but no stable resources that I am aware of. Do you see what I fear?"

"With armed forces and underground ties they may not produce goods, but they can appropriate them. There might be predation on established trade lines if they have money, and if you don't know where they are getting their money, then you can't stop them from interfering," the boy answers, and she makes a strange face.

"There is that, but I can guess that they take in money from doing unsanctioned missions which destabilizes the market a bit. I do fear that they might attempt to start stealing goods as well. There is also the fact that there are so many variables, so I can't account for any actions they might take. I don't even know if they opened the borders or if this was a security lapse. I have a big hole in my information network with them, and that puts me at a disadvantage," she says seriously, her husky voice filling the room.

She's changed so many things that there is almost no way of knowing what the Akatsuki will do now. She does best with plots and schemes, but with so many variables she can't do it correctly. If she works it right, she may be able to direct Orochimaru's resentment towards keeping them at bay.

Then again, she doesn't know anything except maybe their end goals. There wasn't a solid story on how the Akatsuki rose to power or supported Ame. Without logistics she can't make any defensive or offensive maneuvers against them. No blackmail, no information, no secrets to use save for that they probably have some enormously powerful shinobi at their disposal.

She has information on almost every one of the jinchuuriki, which was hard as hell to gather and wouldn't have been possible without her prior knowledge, so she will probably know if one disappears, but then again, maybe not.

All of this is ignoring the fact that maybe Kisame might show soon. That maybe Kisame is out right now.

It's all ifs, and she worries that the things she has prepared for over the many years might not be enough. She has spent so long preparing and expanding, but she isn't sure what to expect now that things might slowly begin. She's lost, and the future is frightening.

Shit, now she has to worry about this on top of everything else. Son of a bitch.

"These are all just rumors, " she sighs, forcefully relaxing herself. There's no use losing sleep over this, though she doubts she'll get a choice tonight.

"We could go after them," Zabuza growls, and he spits what looks like flakes of bone onto his plate.

Her eyebrows shoot up, because wow . "Did you bite through bone?" she demands, appalled. "What are you, a fucking wild carnivore?"

You suddenly gain the jaw strength of a bulldog?"

He sticks his tongue out and uses his finger to scrape bits of white off, and she stares at him, distracted by this display.

"I know cooking weakens bone, but that's still insane, Zabuza."

He grunts nonchalantly, picking something out of his teeth like an ill-mannered heathen. Her face scrunches up because it's so distasteful.

"Ryuishi-sama. Rain. Rogue ninja. Information," Haku says succinctly, drawing her back to the topic at hand.

She turns to him and flaps her hand flippantly, a flash of worry crossing her face. "If they just escaped Ame there's a good chance they might try and restock or raid some places in Tani for money and supplies. If we continue as we planned we will eventually hear word if it turns out to be true, instead of just hearsay," she explains.

Haku nods slowly in understanding. They will continue to venture around and assist where needed then.

"Now hand me some food before I take a shower," she asks, and Zabuza shoves the bag at her with his spit-covered fingers while she rolls over and sits up.

There isn't much talking going on during the meal, and Ryuishi runs over the security measures in place. No White Zetsu will be able to fake bleeding or a blood test, so Oto is safe because of Orochimaru's strict adherence to regular checkups among his personnel. She doesn't imagine many White Zetsu will infiltrate the prostitution sector of the Mumei, although that would be hilarious. Hooker Zetsus.

Still, that leaves her vulnerable in her trade, smuggling, and other criminal markets. The nomadic tribe isn't even safe.

There has to be a way to keep them out, and while she can rely on the secretive nature of her group, and its hidden status, she can't rely on it forever. The medical checkups most get are sporadic in nature, and that means if Orochimaru's group is compromised, so is her own.

Her brow furrows as she fills herself with rice.

Dammit, why does she have to be so stupid sometimes? Why can't she be better? She seriously thought that maybe she stopped sucking so hard, and that perhaps things might be looking up. She worked so fucking hard, but it isn't hard enough apparently. She doesn't even know if these rumors are true and it is killing her.

She has a sinking feeling in her gut when she looks up at Haku and Zabuza, who are quietly consuming their own meals. They deserve better, and so do the Mumei. She has to be better, so she can give them what they deserves, and so she can get Kisame back, and so she can anticipate these things so they don't blindsides her so badly.

Her gut clenches after her meal is half-eaten. She really isn't that hungry anymore.

"I'm taking a shower," she announces, shoving her food off to the side. One of them can finish it later.

She doesn't even wait for an answer, standing up so fast it makes her a bit dizzy and trudging her way to the bathroom, knowing that the soaps and shampoos will already be inside. She needs to shave, and maybe scream some more later.

She closes the door behind her and flings off her clothes in a fit of aggression, throwing them onto the floor far harder than necessary, and frustration sings inside her head. She doesn't want to feel so angry.

Once more she wonders if she is being greedy. She already has Zabuza and Haku, does she really need to work for more?

The water pours over her, steaming and hot, and she stands under it, thinking about the answer to that.

She doesn't want to care, but it's not an option any longer. She does. She cares about Hanako, Kagami, and Misaki. She cares about the Mumei who look at her as something worth following. She wants to be able to do them good, to keep making their lives better.

She cares about Orochimaru, who is something weird and threatening without a label to put forward. Is he a guardian, a friend, a partner? Even Kabuto, in the sense that he is her vicious and super fluffy kōhai, gets some affection.

She cares about Gaara and Naruto, the boys she spent so much time with when she could, sneaking in and out of the villages just to be around them, to see them smile and laugh. The children that grew up, and their friends, and their siblings, she worries for them. She wants to make a world where they don't have to hurt, where they don't have to struggle so hard.

She cares about Kakashi and Tenzo, and she wishes she could spend more time with them. She yearns for the dorks who are terribly socially awkward, but still supportive. She misses gravity-defying silver hair, and sharing a bed that smells like ozone and puppies. She longs to see weirdly big eyes, and smell fresh tree sap even though there are no trees.

Fuck, she even wants to hugs that little sad fucker Itachi, and raise him right beside Haku. He's too old to be raised now, but he would love the peace of sitting by the beach and not having to fight.

Washing her hair, she knows the truth.

She doesn't want to, but she still cares about Kisame. Zabuza is with her, and so they have Haku, but Kisame was theirs. He was the missing piece to their squad, and though they might not absolutely need him, they wanted him back. It's been a long, long time since they were together, but the loss of him lingers like a bad smell. Once

he comes back, she wants to punch him in his stupid big nose for all the teenage angst he caused her, then hug him because they missed him, and he is home.

Sometimes, though, she doesn't even know how she can face him. If she can look him in the eye and hear the words he knows he will say to her.

Shaving her legs, she tries not to feel the fear in her heart. She tries to sooth it away, but it remains, an insistent whisper. The Akatsuki can take everything away from her. Rain can ruin everything she has worked so hard to build, undo every change she has made. They are powerful and fearsome, and they scare her.

She wants to crush them like a bug, destroy them before they destroy her, but there are people inside of that group she would save. There is still a desire to protect.

Logically, she knows the responsibility isn't hers. She knows there is no guilt to feel about sins she did not commit, but she has never made it to a perfectly rationalized existence. She still feels those shitty emotions, and she's real tired of it. Something feels ready to snap.

She's come so far, but she has to keep going.

Ryuishi washes the last of the soap off of her and dries off, running a towel through her hair and looking for her toothbrush. Outside the door, the light is off, and she knows that Haku will have fallen asleep after such a large meal. She frowns around a mouthful of minty toothpaste, and then jots down 'remind Haku to brush his teeth day and night' on her mental to-do list for the morning. He couldn't have brushed them with her brooding in the bathroom.

Or maybe he and Zabuza did that gross thing were they swallowed the toothpaste again, the weirdos.

She picks up her clothes and turns the bathroom light off before she re-enters the room, and she is pleased to see she was right. Haku is out, his mouth open as he breathes, lulled to sleep by a good meal. She hovers over him for a second, raising the sheets a little higher on his shoulders as gently as she can, tucking him in. Her hand raises and she traces the line of his cheek, appreciating how peaceful his face looks, his porcelain skin illuminated by the lights outside their window.

She straightens and turns around, only to jump and nearly shit her pants. Zabuza is sitting up behind her, not a foot from where she is standing, watching the scene with shuttered eyes.

Her hand goes to press on her chest where her heart is dropping the bass like a Skrillex song, hammering away in her fright. Damn him and his hunter-nin skills, this sort of stealth is bullshit. She didn't even hear the fucking sheets move.

She sees his hand raises up slightly and he signs with his fingers so he doesn't wake the teenager.

'On duty. First watch'

Ryuishi nods and takes a deep breath. It actually hurts a bit. He startled the fuck out of her, and he's lucky she didn't swing.

Then she steps forward and reaches out to ruffle his hair, because she'll never not be thankful that he came back, and as much as he tries her patience, she's glad she isn't alone. She feels an arm settle around her waist, and he leans in to the touch for a moment. A single second of serenity and kinship in the dark.

Then, because both of them know they can't have nice things, he uses the arm around her waist and her relaxed muscles against her, rolling to his side and flinging her into the mattress like a ragdoll. It's a move any muscly, spandex wearing, showboating wrestler would be proud of.

She spits out sheets and glares halfheartedly at him through a single squinted eye.

'Operative incapacitated,' he signs cheekily, and she can feel the smugness rolling off of him.

She punches him in his ribcage and is satisfied when he grunts loud enough to make Haku shift and murmur in his sleep.

It is his turn to glare, and she smirks at him wordlessly, throwing herself under the covers and settling down to sleep, knowing she'll be safe until it is her turn to take watch.

AN: 'Actual five year olds Zabuza and Ryuishi attempt to raise teenage son, and Hatake Kakashi has no more shits left to give genin team while he snoops' was the working title for this chapter, but it's too long. Uhm, more plot? And characters? Lots of important things, we see the results of growing too fast and stretching awareness thin, The Akatsuki begin to sneak in, Rain becomes a thing, and Team seven gets a statistically improbable mission. Sasuke is friends with Shino, Sakura is done with boys, and Naruto became a ninja, not a house keeper. Kisame is a shit and probs will go unmentioned for a while while shit hits the fan.

Feel free to check out my tumblr, because a lot of OTRATS shit goes down there, and beautiful children have sent in much fanart.

A shout out to my lurkers, the secretive babes. A round of applause for my favoriters and followers. A gigantic stadium full of wild cheering for my reviewers, who make my heart sing, and keep me strong.

(And to whoever keeps leaving anonymous guest reviews as the Akatsuki/ Pein, you're fucking cool as hell.)

Fireworks and Parades for my beta Enbi, who deals with my messy grammar and publishes these on top of all the work she does irl. She is the air I breathe.

Question: It's revealed in this chapter that Zabuza likes wearing clothes about as much as Ryuishi does. How did Kisame deal with these shameless hooligans? OR How does Kakashi deal with Sasuke hating his general existence?

In Which Roles are Established

I do not own Naruto.

The sharp howling screech of some sort of monkey splits the morning air, and Ryuishi-who never adjusted well to getting up in the morning-feels the urge to do unspeakable violence rear its head. That same ridiculously loud monkey species has been shrieking on and off for the past half hour, and every fucking time she thinks it has stopped, the sound starts up again, making her jump.

Zabuza stands across from her, Haku in between them, and he looks like he is starting to find the noise distasteful as well, if his furrowed brow is anything to go by. Which is good, because she has had far too little caffeine this morning, and she wants it dead but is too lazy to chase it down. And if Zabuza gets angry enough, he'll throwl kunai at them to take them out, while Ryuishi would be stuck waiting until they came into range of her meteor hammer.

Disgruntled, she continues glaring at the thick, sticky, putrid mud that the road has turned into after a morning shower. The air is heavy not only with sound, but moisture as well. Thin blankets of fog roll in between the greenery, more like steam than anything else. As ninja raised among the cold, thick sea fog of Water Country, this mist is comparatively pathetic and wispy, but there is still enough to impair vision when combined with the thick foliage.

Not that it matters much to her, though. She's got shit vision anyway, and in a humid place like this, vibration and sound carry very well. Of course, scent actually becomes harder, when drowned out by all of the flora and fauna, but she has time enough to know the two she needs to: Zabuza's musky weapons oils, and Haku's crisp, clean scent.

"Half a day northeast at this pace," she murmurs quietly, her eyes sweeping her surroundings. Ever since she picked up on those rumors of rogues from Rain, she has been extra paranoid. She feels some impending sense of doom creeping around deep in her navel. It's like a sense of constipation combined with dread, and it is, quite literally, stomach churning.

(Don't get her wrong, she's very confident in her ability to defend her own, and combined with Zabuza, they are a threat to be taken seriously. Two thirds of a group known for their ferocity and bloodlust is not something to be taken lightly, especially when they are protecting young.)

Zabuza nods when he hears her words, shifting his stance to observe her blind spots. He looks annoyed not only at the monkeys, but the heat and humidity as well. A thin sheen of perspiration has begun to shimmer on his skin, and his shirt was abandoned the moment they left civilization. Not that his shirtlessness should be an indicator of anything. She doesn't even know why he chose to buy them. Any excuse and they go missing, stuffed inside a scroll to be forgotten until they get home and she does laundry.

They've been at work for a week and a half or so now, stopping periodically to put up earthen levees and helping repair the canoes and boats that will be used when the water level rises. Most of the cities have at least some preparedness.

The next place they have decided to assist now is further north than most of the trade areas, but though it may not be as large, it is still important. It's a storage base for many goods coming out of Fire, Grass, and Wind, and also a big target for anybody looking to raid. It lies just a few hundred yards from a large river that provide the workers and families there with fish and lush vegetation for a large part of the year, but every season before the monsoons and flooding strikes, it has to be fortified.

The strength of the flow usually tears down the levees they are able to put up, but Ryuishi is planning on building more than just levees. It

will take some time, but they will be carving out some diversion spillways with gates to redirect the flow of water around the settlement and back into the river further downstream. As none of them are Doton users, it means that the three of them will be heading a work force and digging with what they can while patrolling on and off just in case. After all, if she was some broke ass bandit, or rogue from Rain, she would hit a place just like this. Then again, maybe not, because it would be obvious. If it were actually Ryuishi herself, she would probably head south into Wind and hit a caravan, because though it would be more trouble, it would be less expected. But it's not her making the decisions, so it's hard to say.

Hypotheticals, all of it. She doesn't know enough to plan, and it bothers her.

"It's hot," Zabuza states suddenly. His gravelly voice stands out awkwardly, one low-pitched sound in a forest of high notes.

She slides her gaze over to him, exasperation overtaking her features. "Thank you, Zabuza. How ever could we have known about your discomfort if you hadn't told us?" she drawls. "It's not like you haven't been saying that for the past week."

Haku hums noncommittally between them and keeps his mouth closed. What he wants to say is that Zabuza-sama has only said it as many times as she had made that contented, contemplative sound in the back of her throat. Some sort of cross between a hum and a purr.

He thinks that the sound is her way of appreciating how nice it is to not be overrun by the sheer, staggering amount of effort and labor that went into managing as much as she does. For someone who enjoyed lounging around as much as Ryuishi-sama seemed to, she was often in the grasp of some cause or another. From examining the crops produced, to overseeing the protection of the trade caravans, to carefully managing the information collected by her network, she was often working. Her diversified assets and scattered populations of followers, subjects, and businesses made it even

harder than it usually would be, and much of their time was spent traveling around the continent. And that was all discounting her status as co-founder of the Hidden Sound Village.

The teenager ponders such things while he watches the two adults bicker and grumble back and forth like some sort of white noise, occasionally interspersed with the dull, meaty thud of one person striking another.

"Ryuishi," intones Zabuza darkly.

She turns to him, her eyebrow raised and expression insolent. "What?" she demands.

He doesn't answer, and instead he reaches out his hand, palm facing upward expectantly.

"Fucking... are you for real right now, Zabuza?" she asks, absolutely exasperated. "Did you stop us just because you were hot and hungry?"

He simply jerks his hand again and she rolls her eyes, patting down her pockets in search of something he would deem acceptable. He is the oldest among them, but he acts like an overgrown child at times.

"Here," she says, thrusting some jerky from her left shin pocket into his palm. "Eat up and quit acting like a baby. We ate breakfast like two hours ago."

"I am not acting like an infant," he defends tonelessly. She isn't sure if it's because he actually recognized it as an insult, or if it is because this is one of those things that went over his head. Then again, he might be doing it just to fuck with her at this point.

"Whatever you say. But you keep eating like this and you'll be fatter than a Kumo noble."

He sneers at her and peels away a few layers of his mask to reveal his mouth, sharp teeth and all. She never did figure out if those were genetic or shaped with a file.

"I hope you get some stuck between your teeth," she condemns quietly. Apparently, not quietly enough, because he purposefully touches his sweat-slicked chest, and then holds the appendage out toward her.

She blanches at the threat, because it's gross on principle. It's one thing to ride piggyback on someone and have them sweat, and another thing entirely to just have them fling their nasty hand around like a heathen.

"Ew! Zabuza, what the hell!" she cries, darting off the branch and away from the outstretched hand. Haku snaps back to attention as the trio begins to move once more through the trees. He takes his place following Zabuza, who chases an A-rank Kunoichi through the foliage with a sweaty hand and a mouth full of dried meat.

Reaching the city is somewhat of an ordeal, because after half a day of travel, and a lot of joking around, Ryuishi gets somewhat serious, just like she has done every time they have entered a settlement before. First impressions are big deals, and appearance matters, especially in a place that will not know her on sight. The population here has been sent word, and she has come here a few sparse times, but not as much as she has visited others. Besides, this is the Odayaka Oni's time to be seen, and also their beautiful Haku.

So before they break through the treeline, Ryuishi goes over them both like a preening high society mother at her daughter's coming out ball. She smooths Zabuza's spiky hair as best she can, glad that he isn't wearing his headband like a slob anymore. It's useless to try and fix his hair, but she still tries to anyway. She wipes the dirt from his arms and makes sure the medallion she gave him glimmers in plain sight. She turns to Haku, and she picks the creases out of his clothes while he fixes her own fly-away hairs and ties her crop

top up in the back to expose her tattoo. Part of the legend of the Rakki Ryuu is her mark, after all.

It might look a bit like familial grooming, and maybe it is. She prefers to call it preening, though. Makes her sound more like a feline or bird, and less like a stupid monkey.

(God, she hates monkeys.)

Then they emerge from the treeline like true ninja. Which is to say, one minute they aren't there to civilian eyes, and then they are standing on one of the main streets as a unified group. Ryuishi keeps her smile pleasant as whispers pick up, and she's sure Zabuza looks intimidating as ever. Haku looks like a fucking angel, of course, but when doesn't he?

This place isn't a stronghold of her sex workers, though there are a few spotted through out the place, as there often is. Rather, it is a trade-based city that some of the original refugee merchants came to call home. There are only two or three original Kiri inhabitants who came here, but it was enough to give her a strong footing and start the stories. Combined with the growth her advice provided them, in this town, she was known. And with the services that the roaming clan groups gave, she was welcomed with opened arms.

Ryōta Yūsei was one of the older street urchins that fell in with the Mumei, already in his late teens in during the fall of Kiri, and it is him she looks for now, but she takes her time, letting the word spread.

"Helpers for the canals, eh? Maybe we won't lose so much to water damage-" she hears somewhere to her left.

"-the ninja? I'm not sure, we'll have to-" and this she tries to listen to harder, but it tapers off quickly, much to her displeasure.

"-is he, a bodyguard? He must be, standing so close to her, with that sword-" a woman with dark brown hair murmurs, watching them pass with sharp eyes.

"-I bet you a hundred ryo it's *him* . He's got a medallion, see? Oh man, Haru is going to lose it-" a teenager exclaims with gusto, slapping his friend on the back.

"-guards? I don't think so. Look at how close they're standing-" snaps an older woman, her skin folded with time, and her hair riddled with white.

Ryuishi listens hard, and she keeps her eyes open for a familiar head of dark hair and bright eyes. For every one whisper she hears about them, there are more about everyday life. Those that know her will notice the her group, but those that don't usually assume she is a merchant or trader from Waterfall because of her skin. Wait, is that racist? Is there racism here? Well, there's stereotypes about ninja and countries, but not usually skin color.

One upside, she guesses. Less racism, more brutal murder.

They make it further in the town, to where the market fades into homes, and beyond that, warehouses near the river. Yūsei finally makes himself known, emerging from a side street looking both excited and flushed. When he spies Zabuza, though, his face drains of color and he seems to wilt.

"Ryōta-san," she greets. His eyes dart to her, then back to him, then to Haku, and he gets a strange expression on his face. Most likely attempting to figure the group out, just like everyone they showed themselves to beforehand.

"Ryuu-hime," he greets cautiously. "And... guests?"

She laughs, and though it is a fake laugh, it still sounds real. (She's practiced it far too much for it not to.) Some of the tension drains out of the merchant's body at the sound.

"Haven't you heard, Ryōta-san? The Oni came home," she states offhandedly. The merchant's eyes snap over to Zabuza once more, surprise painting his features. Which is a bit rude, but the

swordsman could give a peacock a run for its money when dealing with ego. A bewildered stare from a stranger isn't going to hurt his feelings.

"That sword..." Ryota mumbles. He looks back to her smiling face with dawning realization. She doesn't know why more people don't connect her old teammates with the folklore, but then again, she has no idea how so few know the connection between Ningyo and Ryu. It's almost like somebody has been obscuring details and muddling information for years or something...

(Somewhere, Orochimaru and Kagami sneeze in tandem.)

"Come now, are you going to let us help out? Or are we going to stand here all day?" she asks. The man seems to find his strength, standing tall once more. He doesn't hide his determination or surprise very well at all, but it doesn't matter. He's a trader, not a ninja, he doesn't need to hide.

"I think that there will be enough work for tomorrow, hime," he says. "Please, let me show you where you and your group will be staying."

"Many thanks," she answers, and she can feel the relieved sighs withheld by her group. Work after travel would have been exhausting, but it was best to offer.

She just hopes that they have a cool interior, or at least a dry one.

Sweat becomes the least of the compulsively hygienic Ryuishi's problem when they get to work.

Manual labor is still the name of the game in the Elemental Countries for the most part, and while they have heavy machinery in some areas, the flow of information, ideas, and technology is ridiculously stunted in this world. She's complained about it many times before, but it's still one of her favorite things to bitch about inside her head, since nobody else has a system of comparison. The fact that so

many people have no idea what a motor is when the Land of Snow has a motherfucking train boggles her mind.

For all that Kiri was terrible, Ryuishi did grow up in a hidden village that was, at one time, on par with Konoha. It had an interesting mix of technology and goods. Most places, though, are rural as fuck, which is why everything is so ass backwards a lot of the time. It's steampunk in some areas, and full-on Stone Age in others. A lot of townships and people go their whole lives without seeing a motorboat, or a ninja for that matter.

With no Romans to build roads, no Mongols to invade, and a large landmass to cover, shit gets really weird.

She tries to answer the question 'why' so much it makes her head hurt. She doesn't know why. If she knew why she might be able to fix it. As it stands she can only shrug in bewilderment and put two middle fingers up toward the horrible shinobi habit of not writing history down, because apparently your enemy is going to steal that shit or whatever. What is your enemy going to do with your history? Good question. More middle fingers and fuck-if-she-knows. She's studied this shit, too.

Ask her How Kumo formed, or why the Land of Iron is considered neutral territory. She can answer those. But can she answer why this storage city... town... area still uses canoes and shovels instead of back hoes and boats, especially when it should have better tech with all the trade that goes through it? No.

It makes her want to scream, and she is sure Haku can feel his 'angry guardian senses' tingling, because he take one look at her when she sees the tools they are given to help with, and he volunteers to assist the women and children of the city provide for the workers. The traitor darts out of there faster than a striking snake when he obtains permission from Zabuza in the form of, "Keep an eye on the noncombatants and watch the perimeter. Any sign of trouble and you find us."

Which leaves her, Zabuza, and a sweaty, humid day, and good publicity that isn't going to create itself.

"Well Zabuza," she says, eyeing their tools. "How about we call this endurance training."

She sounds like she's on the verge of tears. To be fair, the idea of shoveling thick, clay-like mud by hand into wheel barrows for others to cart off hurts her soul. Not because it's hard work, but because there is no way she's getting out of this clean. The mud stinks, and it's going to be crazy sweaty work. Not to mention the cement they're mixing to set along the spillways and levee, which always finds a way to ruin her pants. She's stuck busting her balls because she has the strength of a kunoichi, and Haku already took the easy job playing house, the brat.

Still, it's always fun to amaze people with what she can do. Her body is a wonderful thing, a tool that took a lifetime to train.

"Strength training," he corrects, and she shrugs. It's whatever.

"Do you need help putting on sunblock before you go out there, pale boy?" she teases, but he just nods. She sighs, because now she has to pull out the greasy lotion so that her very pale teammate does not get burnt by the sun like a Swedish native in Rio.

Somehow, and she's not sure how-she never put it in there, and Kali knows the other two people in her house earned their keep by being the precious inhabitants of her heart-she procures sunblock from her bag. One of the wonderful things Zabuza and Haku liked to do was be pale and porcelain-toned while she ran around butterscotch and bronze.

She didn't even know ninja burned until Zabuza fell asleep on the beach by their house one day. When she went outside to check on him hours later, he was pink, and mad as a bull. She never knew he threw temper tantrums, but there is literally nothing else she can call what he did. He picked up his massive sword and threw it into the

swamp like a child throwing a toy, and he never stopped complaining when he peeled.

Sunburn wasn't a problem in Kiri, and apparently it wasn't too bad for shinobi anyways. Haku, for example, didn't burn, but then again he preferred loose, flowing clothing, and Ryuishi made sure he was supplied with sunblock after that particular incident just in case.

She sighs and motions for him to sit down, because while he isn't that much taller than her, it's still weird to reach up and get his shoulders and the back of his neck. She's a respectable five foot seven to his six foot. She squirts the cream in her hands and sets to work, her cool hands rubbing the cream into his already warm skin.

"Mah, maybe next time we'll do something in Frost," she tells him, working it into his back, underneath and around the blade he refuses to leave. "So you won't be so uncomfortable."

"You'll be cold," he informs her, as if she didn't already know that.

"Nah, I got you, right? It's always easier to warm up than cool down anyway. Haku would loves the snow too, so it will be nice for him as well."

He grunts out a noncommittal noise, but the thought of it sounds pleasant. The snow crunching beneath his feet, and the endless, untouched white. A cloak wrapped around not only him, but his partner as well. Haku fidgeting excitedly at the chance to play in the snow. It's a good thought, but he supposes that as long as he has them with him, he doesn't care what the environment is. Besides, her hands are cool enough to keep him comfortable.

They move up from his lower back, and though they are calloused and strong, they feel small and fragile. Deceptive in nature, right down to her nimble fingers. He has seen those hands tear into flesh like a beast's claws. Still, they are supportive and caring as they cover his shoulders.

They leave his back, and he hears her wiping them clean on her pants in quick strokes, the thick fabric rustling with her movements.

"All done," she declares. " Now, finish and let's go dig through mud."

Zabuza nods, finishing the places he can reach. When he stands, it's with the realization that they will be directing separate civilian teams for the spillway, and he frowns at the thought.

Hatake Kakashi drifts down the rivers of Tani in the stifling, oppressive heat, and wonders why he didn't just lie and fail his genin team. He hasn't been on a C-ranked mission in years, and he remembers why.

Civilian travel is *awful* .

The rowers around him are certainly capable, but they are, in the end, oarsmen piloting a boat downstream from farther north, and not ninja. He should be running on top of the trees, thick and green as they are, or even dashing across the surface of this river, no matter the rough patches. Not that the sprawling network of river country has many rapids until the southern parts of the country drop in elevation, or the floodwaters come. Usually the muddy, brownish waters are wide and meandering, perfect for trade. That is, until their source somewhere high in the north of Earth Country combines with melting snow, or the rains of Ame flood them over. Then the murky waterways swell over and debris makes boating a bit harder. Not running, though.

He supposes he only has himself to blame. If he had taught his genin such things, it might have been an option, but instead he gets to watch them as they crane their heads and gawk like pedestrians at their surroundings.

Honestly, he's more interested in this boat. It's wide and flat, and it shouldn't be good for rougher patches of water, but only his genin had stumbled as it went over some shallow rapids and jostled

around. They call it a 'flat bottom barge'. It's new, the design of some old man who learned how to read in his later age and drafted the crafts. It's capable of hauling much, much more than the narrow, V-bottomed boats that came before it. Interesting boat, and he's sure it would be good for fighting with the stability it provides. Not easily defensible though, because of its shape and size. A target, to be sure, but that doesn't seem to bother the laborers or merchants hauling stock down to the city they've been assigned to assist.

Still, he can only pace the deck for danger and admire the boat for so long, and he eventually falls back into the habit he blames a certain missing-nin for entirely. His hand reaches in his pocket and he withdraws an orange book, thumbing it open easily. The series has seen him through many boring times, and it's easy to lose himself inside the tale. The man always seems to get the girl, each time he tries, with almost no exception. This chapter is worn with wear and time, one of his favorites, about a cunning spitfire with dark eyes. The protagonist seduces her in the middle of a battle, earning her respect not only for his talent on the field, but for outwitting her as well.

"HOLY SHIT!" one of his students screeches. Kakashi sighs, and when he looks up from his book, the three genin are clustered around a long, winding form. He curses inwardly.

"It's a monster, dattebayo!" Naruto exclaims, and Sasuke readies his kunai without needing to be asked, rising for a killing blow.

"Wait!" Kakashi cries, but Sakura is already there, holding her hand out to stop them.

One of the resting oarsmen approaches as the others look on, their eyes baleful and wary as they watch the ninja children with scowls firmly on their faces.

The serpent in front of them is one of the few that can make noise, and it rumbles out a low, husky, warning hiss. Air pushes through it's

mouth as it's rears back, and Kakashi is by his students the same time the oarsman is.

"It's gigantic! I bet it's super poisonous!"

" *Naruto* . Shut up!" growls Sakura, and she jerks her hand for Sasuke to put his weapon away. He looks at her for a moment like she has lost her mind, but her eyes dart to the laborer. The dark haired boy follows her gaze.

The man looks chagrined, and his eyes are glued to the form of the pudgy serpent not with fear, but devotion. Slowly, as to not startle the man, Sasuke puts the weapon away, and the worker goes to reach out for the python carefully.

"Little miss there knows what's best," the man says, and he grasps the snake behind the head, letting the thick muscle coil around his arm. "You don't be killing these here unless you want trouble."

Naruto balks, and Sasuke looks equally appalled as the man lets the snake crawl up his arm fearlessly, nothing but respect in his hold. Slick scales wind around taut muscle built from years of rowing, and the snake seems to watch the children carefully. Kakashi knows that its eyesight is poor, but the way it flicks it's tongue out gives away its alert status. It tastes the mammals surrounding it, and the presences of so many seems to make it agitated.

"They're holy creatures for the locals," Sakura explains. "The snakes are said to control the water, but more than that they eat the mice and rats that destroy stock and spoil crops."

Though he didn't teach her that, something like pride fills up Kakashi. At least someone became informed about the region before coming and jumping around blindly. This was almost a disaster of epic proportions. The first time they get out of country, they almost insult their entire vessel by slaying a non-venomous python that surfaced for a bit of rest.

"Getting one to pick your boat is good luck," explains the oarsman. The earth-toned creature is about as long as his leg, and seems to have calmed a bit, its body rhythmically tightening and untightening, its head gone still in the man's hands.

"But won't it bite?" asks Sasuke, and Kakashi sighs again.

"You leave it alone and let it do what nature intended, and it lets you do your job," the man says firmly.

"There's a temple to Benzaiten, and consequently, Ugajin in the capital of River," Kakashi says helpfully, because he's a teacher now, and that's his job, he supposes. If they don't know the fertility gods, though, he's not explaining it any further. If they start speaking of those things, it's going to get out of hand very quickly.

Perhaps he'll simply summon Pakkun when the time comes to explain the birds and the bees. If he's lucky, they already know because it should have been covered in the Academy. If he's very, very lucky, Sakura will have already started her... uh, womanly troubles, and it will never come up. Ever. At all.

What was the Hokage thinking, assigning him a team? He understands that Naruto is his teacher's son, and that he's the only one to assist with Sasuke's Sharingan, but couldn't he get a third male instead of a female? Of course, he can't complain too much, because Sakura is the one who swooped in and saved the day. Sasuke and Naruto, though-

"Isn't it slimy?" queries the blond boy.

The oarsman looks exasperated, and possibly resentful at the ignorant accusation. "It's a snake, not a frog, boy."

His tone is perhaps a bit sharp, but Kakashi understands. They are foreign ninja who almost just killed a respected animal who assists them not only with repelling vermin, but keeping their jobs as well.

Traders wouldn't use ships that regularly lost stock to rodents or amphibians, so a snake on the ship makes sense.

It would be the equivalent of somebody visiting Konoha and attempting to assist the Hokage cross the road because of his age. It's appalling and more than a little disrespectful.

Naruto watches the man with wide eyes, and the snake on his arm. He sees something in those clear sky blue orbs, a transformation, things clicking into place. It takes a few seconds, and Kakashi might actually be able to hear it when the words connect with him, because the energetic boy startles them all when he bows his head.

"I'm sorry," he proclaims, "I didn't mean any offense."

Sasuke, shocked at the usually exuberant and unapologetic boy's behavior, widens his eyes at the sight. Kakashi watches several things click into place in him as well-honestly, genin are so easy to read-and he does the Uchiha clan proud. His bow is much more formal and suited to a ranking clan than Naruto's.

"I apologize," he intones sharply.

Sakura stands tall, smiling smugly as the oarsman lets out a laugh at the two overeager boys, years melting off his face as he barks out his joy.

"You three are young yet," he chuckles. "Just leave the poor thing alone and get back to work. The city will be coming up soon after the fourth or fifth bend."

The two pop back up as if it all never happened, and Naruto shoots the man a brilliant smile that could rival Guy's. It is a worrying trait, and Kakashi considers how much effort it would take to make his genin smile with fewer teeth, or even better, none at all.

Too much effort, he decides.

"Yes sir!" he barks out.

He wonders if Naruto remembers that this civilian isn't his commander. He'll have to fix that, he thinks as he watches the oarsmen take the creature where it can be best put to use among the crates. He claps his hands together loudly, and three faces turn to greet him at the sound, staring up at his smiling eye with trepidation. Nothing good comes when he makes noise, nothing but formation drills and practice.

"Mah, that's enough from you three. Wedge formation with Sakura on point, because she just stopped you two from making even bigger fools of yourselves," Kakashi says cheerfully, and Sasuke's face sours as if he bit directly into a lemon. Naruto shrugs it off as if it means nothing to him and takes his place while the pink-headed girl simultaneously blushes with pride and embarrassment.

"Are you sure, Kakashi-sensei?" she murmurs.

"It's a boat Sakura-chan," he reminds her. It takes a special kind of person to screw up patrol on a boat. A gifted individual of truly desperate proportions. One simply observes the surrounding foliage and trees, and occasionally the water. Not even a genin should be able to mess this up. Besides, the water itself shouldn't even be a problem. It's not like there are any Mist-nin near these parts anyway.

Still, he covers them, because who knows what they teach genin these days. His lone eye shifts, observing the multiple layers of the jungle. In River and Waterfall, only about two percent of the sunlight that shines on the canopy reaches down to the jungle floor. The biospheres are broken down into three parts; floor, branches, and canopy. He knows from experience that no ninja but a native or an Aburame would ever hide in the leaf litter because of the overwhelming and aggressive insects that permeate the area.

Back in the Warring Clans Era, it was a Sarutobi specialty to travel in these jungle areas, a skill taught to them by their monkey and ape summons. They were some of the very few capable of navigating the

narrow branches and thin vines of the canopy. Most ninja prefer to use the branches around mid-height for travel. It's easier for one thing, or as easy as navigating dense foliage can get, and one tends to upset less wildlife that way as well.

Kakashi examines all areas anyway, including the river. It is better to be paranoid than relaxed, especially when traveling with three children.

It's clear, and he takes the time to watch his team parade around the edges of the craft, looking particularly bored. Their movements are out of sync and there is a definite feeling of naïveté around them that screams 'inexperienced'. But only time can change that, and honestly, watching them bicker is nostalgic. Painfully so.

Kakashi swallows down a bitter lump in his throat yet again and turns to face the front of the ship once more. The river is widening out and slowing down, and there is beginning to be a bit more traffic on its surface. Canoes and fishing vessels slip around the edges of the barge, and the occasional dock attached to a dirt path appears.

His keen nose picks up on the smells of civilization. There is smoke and food, as well as the stink of people sweating in the heat, and the strong stench of fish permeates the air. The scent of hot steel warehouses and residential dwellings begin to mingle, along with the sour odor of jungle mud, full of decay.

The greenery gives way to an urban sprawl intersped with flora. He hears his genin release obvious sighs of delight at the sight, which must be exotic to those who have kept safe inside of Konoha's walls for their entire lives. Structures on stilts stand above the waters, and bridges cross the wide river. The bargemen begin to call out to each other, alerting the vessels surrounding them to their intentions.

In the distance he can see the beginnings of earthen levees, and and further down there are signs of even more construction. That is where they will be assisting tomorrow, after lodgings have been dealt

with and he has wrangled three restless genin into some semblance of order.

Ah... When is the last time he had to get lodgings on a mission? It's not like ANBU have to use hotels that often.

"Sasuke, Naruto, Sakura," he calls out. "Y-formation, Sasuke and Naruto on point."

The three call out their affirmatives, and the sound of small feet on wood fills his ears, quiet under everything else, but still far too loud. They approach the edge of the ship as they dock, and Kakashi pays the oarsman, who eyes them once more, as if memorizing their facial features for something else. The silver haired ninja watches him carefully, but he cannot break away from the group to obtain more information. He'll have to let this slide for now, and find a home base first.

"Woah," comes the oblivious voice of Naruto. "It smells so crazy around here. What is that? BBQ? Garbage? I have no idea!"

"Idiot," breathes Sasuke with a sigh. "It's fruit."

"What kind of fruit smells that messed up?"

Kakashi turns around and finds his place in the formation, taking up the back. People begin to surge around them as they walk by, and he keeps his senses peeled for trouble while he listens to their conversation.

"Sasuke's right, Naruto," Sakura proclaims cheerfully, pointing to a stall up ahead, packed full of produce from the surrounding jungle. One particular fruit, large and spiky, smells so strongly Kakashi is forced to breath through his mouth. He forgot about these rancid terrors. He thought it was illegal to eat them on the streets like this now.

"It's durian," she states. "While it smells, it's high in potassium, magnesium, vitamin B, and Vitamin C. It's popular around here because of it's ability to replace minerals lost in sweat."

Another textbook answer, he thinks. Kakashi couldn't care less, though, because there is a special place in hell for people who eat that fruit. He knows that stink will linger in his nostrils all night now. Rotten onions, and Guy's laundry after he works out, mixed with banana for some reason. Though his ability to track is useful, there is always a downside to his powerful sense of smell.

"I want to try it!" the young boy proclaims excitedly, and it's reflex when his hand reaches out to grab him by his obnoxiously orange jacket. At least the boy's pants are a practical black.

"Naruto, stay in formation," he scolds, but really, he just doesn't want that smell any closer.

The boy laughs nervously but does as he's told, settling back into place.

Sasuke looks on with a haughty expression, smirking from his point opposite, and the jounin can feel the undercurrent of tension running through the group. Untrained, untried, and inexperienced, they're all a little new to this, but too cocky to know better. Hopefully they'll be able to work it out, in the literal sense of course. Manual labor will do them good.

A group of women and young children pass them by, carrying what looks like lunches. Most likely for the workers further down. Sakura eyes them carefully, examining some of the strange fashion statements adorning them. Wild vines full of bright, colorful flowers are woven carefully into hair, and loose, flowing fabrics swish around limbs. He supposes that to a pubescent teenage girl, such things would be interesting.

Sasuke, ever the young professional, is alert and wary. It would be good behavior, if he wasn't giving himself away with how obviously

he was doing it.

Save me from the terrors of genin, he thinks in the safety of his own mind. Was his old team ever this oblivious?

"Neh, neh, Sensei?" asks Naruto, his hands jammed deep into his pockets. The sleeves of his garish coat scrunch up, and Kakashi wonders why he even bothers to wear the thing. His white undershirt is uncovered anyway.

"Naruto, please don't," deadpans Sakura, a pained look on her face.

He turns to her, a scowl stretching his whiskered cheeks. "Sakura-chan, you didn't even know what I was going to say," he whines.

"Probably something stupid," spits Sasuke, his own arms crossed. His gaze is as imperious as it is judgmental.

"Not as stupid as your high-collared shirt," Naruto fires back automatically.

"A shirt can't be stupid Naruto, we talked about this," Sakura placates, and Kakashi feels a pressure deep inside his skull. He hopes it's a stroke. Maybe he won't have to train this team if it is.

"They can too! Ino agreed with me. High collars are like, fifteen years out of fashion. I bet Kakashi-sensei even wore them, that's how old they are," he assures her.

"First of all," Kakashi starts, feeling obliged to defend himself. "I have never worn a high-collared shirt in my life. Secondly, fifteen years is not that long."

"In fashion that's *forever*," Naruto explains dramatically.

Sakura nods her head in agreement, because she'd *never* wear something from fifteen years ago. In shinobi time, that was the era of long trenchcoats and an excess of belts, but now the only people

allowed to wear that sort of thing are in T&I, and that's because long coats and belts are useful in their field.

"None of this matters," snarls Sasuke. "My shirt isn't stupid, and you know too much about fashion. Shouldn't you practice your ninjutsu if you have time to study that garbage?"

"Wow, Sasuke. I can do both, can't you? Probably not, because you're not as good as me-"

"Says the dead last, who couldn't even do a bunshin-"

"Would you look at that!" interrupts Kakashi, grabbing the back of their shirts and hauling them to opposite sides of his own body. Like handling puppies, you gotta grab them by the napes of their necks. Maybe shake 'em a little. "It's our hotel! Say hello to your home for the next three weeks!"

The genin look up at the mediocre establishment and peeling paint and the large lizard sunning itself at the entrance don't exactly inspire hope.

A pity, Kakashi could have used some hope.

(Or a painkiller.)

AN: The last chapter of peace before it all goes down hill. It was important to establish the working dynamics of the teams though, and world build a bit. If you didn't notice, this area is a mix of Japan, all of South east Asia, and Easter India. Mainly the Ghats and Bengal bay area. It's also important to note that Naruto is willing to follow Sakura's orders, and Sasuke feels resentful of it. She also is the one among them who thinks and learns about cultures. Not only that, but Naruto apologizes for stepping on toes, and Sasuke is quick to follow because the Uchiha were right and fucking proper. Kakashi has no idea what to do with children, other then order them around, and Ryuishi

and Zabuza treasure Haku, but also kind of let him do his own thing.

A shout out to my lurkers, my favoriters, and my follower. A really long back massage and nice meal for my reviewers, who keep me inspired to keep going. Bless.

And to my Beta, Enbi, a constant thanks for helping me so much. This chapter and the next would have been impossible to get through without having her to discuss what would have changed, and how the characters would be now. She helps me so much, and I am enormously thankful.

Question: What do you think is the connection between Ryuishi's Void and Bijuu Chakra is? OR What sort of AU trope would you put the characters of this fic in (Coffee shop, Sex pollen, College, Monsters, Space, ect. ect.)

In Which Two Worlds Collide

I do not own Naruto.

There is a lot of good things about being female. This, Ryuishi can certainly attest to.

For one, people constantly underestimate the strength of her blows. She means that too, not just once in awhile, but consistently-like clockwork, or the tide. It's always some sort of big surprise that a woman happens to be a taijutsu specialist, or pushing that, even a frontline fighter. She doesn't really know why, considering Senju Tsunade is famous for her ability to punch her way out of anything, but she has yet to face an opponent that wasn't taken off guard by her ability to kick hard enough to break bones. Scratch that, there was a couple Iwa nin who were unsurprised, and like, two from Kumo who took her seriously from the start. They still died, but it was harder to do them in because they didn't underestimate her.

Another thing is that, as a female, society does not frown upon it when she wears dresses. Don't get her wrong, she would be totally cool if everyone could wear dresses, but the truth is that every place she has traveled didn't have a large amount of males donning them. Which, in her opinion, is a crying shame. Dresses are wonderful ways to look good while being lazy. Just show those legs off because you don't feel like wearing pants. Feel the breeze between your thighs, wear a dress, do it!

While she is very jealous that males often gain muscle easier because of a couple hormonal differences, she also likes her body. Sure, maybe men get nice, clean lines, but nature gifted her with curves. She's got that dip in her waist, an ass that won't quit, and legs for days. She never has to worry about inopportune boners either.

She likes the fact that she is allowed to wear her hair long without judgement, and that nobody looks at her strange if she wears makeup. She likes that she can paint her nails and wear a million different styles without being called names or ostracized. Hell, she'll admit it, she likes her boobs because when she needs a distraction, she came with them built in.

Still, for all she likes being female, there are things she could go without.

Menstruation is a joke. A mean one. That time of the month makes everything much harder than it should be. Her scent is stronger and takes more time to cover up, she has to spend money on hygiene products, and her face sometimes breaks out. Sometimes her cravings get a bit out of hand, and it's just a hassle that really isn't worth it.

Societal expectations are a double edged sword. Yes, she likes wearing dresses sometimes and putting on makeup, but she shouldn't have to look good for anybody but herself. She isn't there to heal her team, or become a seduction agent, she's here to tear her enemies apart with her hands and crush them beneath her feet, roaring out her victory. Also, why can Zabuzza have hairy legs, but on her it's weird? Answer her that, society! Shaving is a damn pain and a half! While she's on that topic, why is it terrible when she burps? Her burps are amazing! They can reach amazing levels of noise!

Don't even get her started on some of the kunoichi gear she's sorted through, either. Armor is supposed to be armor. What kind of fucked up world does she live in where her individual breasts each need a cup in a chest plate? How is that helpful? How? And while flower patterns on knuckle dusters can be cute, it's not really her style.

If the gear is bad, some of her employers have been worse. When she started getting back on the job at fourteen, it was like every weird lecher and crazy sexist crept out of the woodwork. They couldn't believe their eyes that a fourteen year old girl was coming to take on bounties or do a protection detail, and honestly, while

underestimation was useful, there came a point where it was completely insulting as well.

To tell the truth though, there were two things that Ryuishi disliked most about being a female.

The first, and most annoying fact, was that she had to pee sitting down. Ooooh, it ticked her off to this very day that she didn't come built with a handy hose for waste expelling. While Kisame and Zabuza got to pee standing up like the dignified fuckers they were, she had to go squat on some god forsaken battlefield and expose herself to the cold. It was awful every time it happened, and she hated it. The things she could do if she could just pee wherever, whenever she wanted. The world would be her oyster, and she'd never have to suffer a disgusting public restroom or leak in her pants again.

The second, and the one that weighs heavily on her mind at this very moment, was that for some reason, it was improper to whip her shirt off when it got too hot. Like her breasts would just jump out and assault an octogenarian if they weren't covered up all the time.

Meanwhile, she bets Zabuza is shirtless wherever he is with his work team right now. He gets to feel the sun on his back, and the breeze on his boobs. Manboobs. Pectorals. *Whatever*. She, however, is stuck not only shoveling mud-which, for all her care, has already caked itself on her pants-but she has to do it with her top on.

It's killing her slowly. She's not sweating too hard, but she can feel it trickle between her cleavage, and it's awful. She's not Tsunade, or Mei, dammit! It's not like they're big ole' jugs flying around, waiting to knock somebody out or give their owner a black eye. They're average, at best. Her crop top is more of an oversized sweat rag at this point, and though her stomach and back are free, her chest is trapped in the awful, sticky, uncomfortable fabric. Dammit, just let them be free!

"Fucking stupid," she grunts beneath her breath, forcing her shovel into the earth. The spillway is slowly forming around her, seven feet deep and fifteen feet wide. Right now most of it is still muddy, but the workers with the frames and cement are behind them, smoothing the dirt down and mixing the hard setting mineral up.

She pulls the instrument out, and it's metal head is stacked tall with an impressive amount of mud, which she hurls angrily into the wheelbarrow beside her in one smooth movement.

In another pivot, she's back, slamming her shovel into the earth, feeling her body absorb the shock. She knows in another life, her shoulders would be starting to ache after hours of work, and her hands would be blistered and raw. Her lower back would hurt from the twisting, and her feet would be numb from standing for so long.

Now, it's just tedious, and her arms barely register the strain, used to dealing with heavy chains and heavier opponents. Her hands are callused and rough, in need of a good softening treatment when they get home. Her lower back feels warmed up, and ready to twist in gross and serpentine ways, and her feet feel fine because standing is nothing compared to traveling for days on end.

Needless to say, the physical labor isn't that demanding. The gnawing sensation of unease in her gut, on the other hand-

She's no fortune teller, she fucked up everything too much for that. Still, she's been unusually anxious for days, filled with some sort of dread. No midnight patrols through the surrounding forests revealed anything, and Haku is within her sensing range. (Not chakra sensing, but rather she can hear him, her keen ears dialed in to his soft voice, and her nose able to pick up his scent now and again. He's fine, flitting around between both sides of the river, and consequently Zabuza and herself, like some sort of ping pong ball.)

"Keeping hauling like that and you'll put us out of business!" one of her fellow workers jokes. She turns to the man who is staring at her wheelbarrow full with wide, gleeful eyes. His shirt is tied around his

waist, she notes with envy, and his sweat held at bay with a strip of cloth around his forehead.

"Tamaki, you work as a dock keeper. We volunteered to do this, there is no business," she reminds the man gently.

"Maybe you volunteered miss, but my wife told me if I didn't help out with the spillway and the warehouses flooded again, she'd take out the lost profits from my hide," he tells her.

She quirks her eyebrows high on her face and lets out an appalled noise. "With a wife like that, who needs enemies?"

The man laughs and grunts as he forces his shovel into the dirt, straining a bit. She takes advantage of his distraction to haul her mud to where the levee's are being reinforced, darting around workers and gliding over the surface of the muck with chakra coated feet.

Ugh, tedious but necessary work. She both loves and hates it.

Idly, she wonders how Zabuza is holding up.

Momochi Zabuza stares at the group in front of him, and he considers what it is he's supposed to do in a situation like this. He doesn't think initiating a fight is the answer here, which is a shame, because he would gladly start one. Everything would be much, much simpler if he could throw himself bodily at his opponents and cut them down.

Still, she wouldn't be too happy about it, considering three of them look like they just stopped wetting their beds. Hell, they're Konoha brats, for all he knows they could still be wetting the bed. The Leaf has a history of sending underprepared babies onto the field, weak-willed and unused to bloodshed. He bets none of them have seen combat, save for their sensei.

... Who just so happens to be Hatake Kakashi, someone even Zabuza isn't sure of his chances with. Stupid Land of Fire and their stupid dōjutsu.

Even worse, there's all these civilians around, and Zabuza knows that if one of them gets hurt she's going to work forever trying to make it not look so bad. Damn these noncombatants and damn their weak, squishy bodies. Meat sacks, all of them. Maybe a limb or two lost won't be so bad-

No. He knows Ryuishi. She will make him pay for it in blood, and he doesn't feel like trying to cook his own meals or being regulated to sleep outside. Even worse, she'll probably get Haku, softhearted as the boy is, to side with her, and it will be awkward and tense. It might be that treatment where she ignores his existence, or the one where she waits until he thinks he's safe then does something unspeakably strange and cruel to him. Like the time she waited until he was almost asleep and punched him in his nose because he had landed a harder hit on Haku earlier that day. Or the time she stared him straight in the eyes while digging her fingers into his wound because, *We show respect to the Mumei, Zabuza. They aren't underlings, they're people.*

He's not falling for it this time. It isn't worth it. His teammate may not be the most bloodthirsty among them (though she is a competitor at times) but she certainly is the most spiteful. He once watched her maim a bounty hunter's leg before killing him because the woman called Haku a slur. It was both endearing and mildly disquieting.

So, fighting is not the answer here. What is, though? Maybe if he just lies-

"Momochi Zabuza," Hatake calls out angrily.

"No," he answers, as if Kubikiribōchō isn't a dead giveaway.

The Konoha-nin looks angry, and Zabuza isn't sure why. He was doing his job, directing the workers on this project and trying to

escape this miserable heat. He has done nothing to this ninja.

Hatake Kakashi would disagree.

In fact, he's incredibly upset. More so than is strictly necessary, because he isn't dumb. Pieces begin falling into place inside his mind, and it makes him angry.

Momochi Zabuza, Demon of the Hidden Mist, and one of the Kiri no Kaijuu. One of *her* teammates, the ones that abandoned her like scum. The teammate responsible for the long, jagged scar that runs across her back and thigh, who killed his entire class, and most likely the teammate she has been hiding for years now.

Now he's standing among civilians, denying his name, and acting like there isn't a history of blood and betrayal behind him. Kakashi is half angry, half anxious. This isn't someone a trio of freshly minted genin can face. He's a shinobi who had a meteoric rise through the ranks of the hunter-nin, who cut his teeth on the front lines of the Third Shinobi War, and who most likely isn't alone.

"Sensei?" asks Sakura hesitantly. The air is thick with tension, and she's nervous and afraid. Who is this man, and why is her sensei standing in a taijutsu stance, as if he is ready to attack?

"You three stay clear," he instructs. "A missing-nin like him is far above your level."

"Missing-nin?" asks Naruto quietly, and Sakura wants to hide her face in her hands. Did Naruto glean *nothing* from their study sessions? She has wasted hours of her youth trying to educate this thick-headed moron.

"A defector, a traitor to the village that raised them," Sasuke sneers, standing tense and ready. His eyes are glued to the man. "Criminals who abandoned their duty as shinobi."

The young Uchiha's words obviously don't go unnoticed by Zabuza, who clenches his fist so hard that the shovel in his hand snaps into little more than splinters. Cold brown eyes zero in on the boy, and the genin choke as the air becomes thick and heavy with a surge of killing intent.

For the genin, it is a first-time experience, and it is terrifying. Naruto shakes in place, and Sasuke freezes as if paralyzed. There is a quiet sob from Sakura, who stands behind Kakashi, quivering. It's hard to breathe, like a weight has been strapped to their chests. The air is thick like water, and it feels like drowning. Fear runs like ice through their veins, and instinct screams at them to run away. This is a predator, and they are prey. He will end them, and there will be nothing left behind but their mangled corpses-

Then abruptly as it started, it ends.

The workers, only a few yards away, breathe a sigh of relief and tremble as they drop their tools, eyeing the new group and the man that has been assisting them for hours now.

Zabuza turns to them stonily. "Lunch break," he commands, and the workers eagerly agree. They begin to clear out, each to their own purposes, eyeing the foreign shinobi with no small amount of suspicion and distaste. The daimyo attempts to help by sending a team of children and an overly hostile leader? The daimyo does nothing right.

The swordsman turns back to the Konoha team, his job securing the noncombatants complete. There will be no spice powder in his mask this time.

"You're getting in the way," he tells the Leaf ninja. They are, and it's beginning to irritate Zabuza, who is already annoyed with the muggy heat and sticky mud. The situation is complex, and he wants nothing to do with it.

He just needs to bide his time until the unit can reform. Haku will be well on his way to informing his partner of the situation. He's sure Ryuishi will have a plan for this, because she always has some idea of some sort.

He eyes the brats behind Hatake once more and wrinkles his nose. Disgusting little creatures, always complicating things.

"Take your team full of infants and leave," he orders, because he is not an unreasonable man. He has mercy (a recent acquisition, true, but it's still there and that's what counts).

"HEY!" the blond shrieks. "We aren't babies, we're shinobi!"

Zabuza withholds a laugh, because no, they aren't. They have no idea what it means to be a shinobi, and he can smell how new they are to this. Even if their jounin wasn't hiding them behind his back like a mother dog protecting her young, he can see their inexperience in their shaking limbs and wide eyes.

"Naruto, quiet," the jounin commands.

He eyes the trio. Obviously they aren't here to collect his bounty, and they certainly don't fit the bill for a stealth team. Their angle is unknown to him.

"He's just some freak with no eyebrows! He doesn't get to talk to me like that!" shouts the blond.

"This isn't a game," Hatake snaps at him sternly, and Zabuza can hear the boy's sharp intake of breath at the reprimand. In Kiri, insubordination like that would have cost a broken limb at least.

"That man had a body count by your age in the triple digits. He's known as the Demon of the Mist, a master of the silent killing technique, and one of the Kiri no Kaijuu."

Zabuza idly wonders what is taking so long. This a lot of chatter for nothing. Why do Konoha-nin always have to talk so much? Can't they just flee or fight in silence like every other nation? It's like some sort of warm up routine, jabbering away about stuff that doesn't matter.

"Kiri no Kaijuu?" whispers the pink haired girl. What kind of hair color is that? What is Konoha feeding their citizens these days? At least Kisame's skin helped him blend in, but if that girl isn't among a cherry tree she's going to stick out like a broken limb.

"A team of monsters who fought for Kiri during the Third Shinobi War, known for their vicious tactics on the battlefield. The Same, the Ningyo, and the Oni."

The blond's face scrunches up in confusion. That's not right. It's the Same, the Oni, and the Ryu, isn't it? Who is this Ningyo person?

Beside him, his teammates clutch their kunai harder in preparation for an attack, and his teacher runs through scenarios in his head. There is no way this ends well.

The momentary standoff is thick with violent energy and the promise of escalation when another, familiar, voice breaks through from the around the edge of the buildings.

"Zabuza, what the fuck? Why did Haku send out the signal, it doesn't sound like there are any enemy ninja trying to kill you-"

Watanabe Ryuishi rounds the corner and steps into what, quite possibly, could be a scene from one of her worst nightmares. Zabuza stands alone in the glorified ditch that is soon to be a spillway, sweaty and gross, his eyes glued on to her. Across from them is not only Hatake, which would be bad enough, but no, all of Team Seven, who are turning to look at her as well. Haku, ever the long-range specialist, observes them from a rooftop where he can hear the goings-on and lay down cover fire if necessary.

She can literally feel the moment the shit hits the fan, and she takes a moment to close her eyes and savor the last moment she knew what was going on in her life. She can feel a nervous sweat break out over her skin, because there are too many lies and secrets here, and oh, good Vishnu, please have mercy on her soul.

"Fairy-nee?" says Naruto with wonderment.

"Fairy-nee?" echoes everybody else. Sakura says it with blatant surprise, and Kakashi is completely deadpan. Zabuza is incredulous, and Sasuke is scornful. Haku is almost out of her hearing range, but she can pick up the saccharine sweetness demanding an answer.

She laughs a little hysterically.

Zabuza is using his bitchface again, the one that is clearly asking her what sort of trouble she's gotten them into now.

"Naruto, do you know her?" Hatake demands, and Ryuishi struggles with the violent urge to just book it. If she runs she looks guilty, but oh god, this can't end well.

"I found her in the dumpster, 'ttebayo!" Naruto proclaims proudly.

"The dumpster," states Zabuza, clearly unimpressed.

"I thought Fairy-nee was the name of your cat," interjects Sakura, and Naruto looks at her quizzically.

"Why would you think that?"

"You always said stuff like she liked it when you petted her hair, and that she liked eating raw fish and sleeping in the sunshine," says Sakura, a little hysterical.

"She does like that stuff though," defends Naruto.

"Watanabe," growls Hatake, and she can feel the murderous intent in his voice. He looks like he's either about to have an aneurysm, or

shit a brick. He's taking the fact that she knows the jinchuuriki of the Kyuubi and his teacher's son very poorly, she sees. At least his anger is on her, and not her team. That's a good thing, right?

"You know Sharingan Kakashi," Zabuza states flatly. He shouldn't be surprised, he really shouldn't. "When you went rogue, did you attempt to socialize with as many dangerous enemies as possible?"

"Wait, the dobe has a sister? And she's a missing-nin?" asks Sasuke. A moment passes.

"*Sharingan* Kakashi?" Zabuza tries again, his voice dropping an octave.

"Fairy-nee is a ninja?!" cries Naruto, alarmed.

"DO YOU EVEN HAVE A CAT?" shouts Sakura, absolutely done with this mess.

"You never told me you were a ninja!" protests Naruto, ignoring his teammates and teacher. He turns on her with stunning blue eyes and she sucks in a breath.

"She's the Kiri no Ningyo, Naruto," Kakashi spits coldly, and really, that's unfair. She was going to maybe tell him one day. If the topic came up. "A dangerous criminal from the Hidden Mist Village."

"The dead last has a legendary criminal missing ninja as a sister?" inquires Sasuke skeptically, then stops and turns to Kakashi. "Also, why are you called Sharingan Kakashi?" he demands after a moment.

Ryuishi feels a steadying hand on her back, as cool as her own skin. Haku has come down from the rooftops, and braces her gently. She feels a little faint, and her thoughts are just one long continuous scream at this point. Her cold sweat is pouring out of her skin, and though she has never choked up like this before, she certainly is now.

"Haku," she whispers. She can feel her control slipping, and her instinct taking over. It's too much thought, too much planning. No escape, no way out. She wants to run or fight, but her mind is shutting down, her thoughts running in circles. Bandits from Rain, Hatake, Sunshine, not last of a clan, Zabuza, Haku, secrets and vulnerability. Calculations wasted, effort down the drain, webs collapsing and burning. Zabuza and Haku, a bridge in Wave, dead and gone and forever out of her reach. Too much, too much, too much!

"Ryuishi-sama." She feels Haku's hand in hers. She's stuck in overdrive, and she clasps the hand tight, shielding him from view behind her. No one will touch him. He is hers, and he won't die. She notices Zabuza approaching, climbing up out of the ditch and hurriedly making his way to the group. She promises herself that they won't take him from her either. Not her son, and not her Zabuza.

"She's a liar," Hatake condemns, and his words hurt more than they should. Like shuriken stabs to the fucking heart. Or maybe the back.

"Kakashi, wait-" she protests.

"She's a dirty informant with no morals," he continues, and it feels like he's twisting a blade into her damn soul, and he needs to *stop* .

"Kakashi," she says again, louder. This is out of control, she needs to reign it back in. He's making Konoha look fucking terrible. Even spilling secrets on empty streets isn't safe, and he's being reckless. She won't let Zabuza and Haku get hurt, but she doesn't like Hatake doing this either.

"She's a savage from Kirigakure, who never cared about anything but herself-"

" **KAKASHI** ," she roars.

The Kakashi whips around to look at her. Even through his mask, she can see his jaw clenched in anger.

"Stop and think," she advises lowly, burying her hurt and panic. She holds on tight to Haku, and focuses on Zabuza's hand on her shoulder. *They are alive*, she thinks manically. *They are alive, Hatake is your friend, and Naruto is your child. It's okay, it's okay. It will all be alright, as long as you keep your shit together.*

His single eye narrows dangerously, and there is a kunai in his hand she never noticed him pulling free, but years of history together aren't forgotten, and she sees his eye dart to their surroundings.

Yes, she urges inside her head. *Take a good look at what you're doing. You are a Konoha jounin on my territory, verbally assaulting me-a political asset-in public. You have a team of fresh genin against at least two jounin level opponents and one unknown. Politically, every move you have made makes me look better in comparison. From my muddy clothes and Zabuza's placement, you can tell what we've been doing. How does this look to the civilians? A foreign group coming in and harassing an established ally?*

She can see the exact moment he recognizes the disadvantage he's working with. His grey eye shutters for a moment, and she sees him shut out his emotions and focus on the situation, the same action she took herself not minutes before. Silence reigns, and it is thick with tension. The moment is ripe with possibility, and it could swing any which way. No matter what happens here, nobody walks away without losses of some sort.

Slowly, as if to test the waters, his foot shifts back, and he slides out of his combative stance. His body language changes and becomes less provocative, and it melts into forced ease. It doesn't make her feel good that the situation is forcing him into this, it makes her feel guilty and malevolent.

She reciprocates his actions, and her squad follows her lead on this by some unspoken rule. It is the trust and teamwork built over years of living and traveling together.

The genin look to their sensei for guidance, obviously ill at ease with the change, and they don't fall out of their combative stances, but they do lower their guard.

"Obviously," she drawls, forcing her voice to remain even and detached. "There are some things that need to be explained."

Kakashi looks at her as if this is a severe understatement, and she knows it is. She barely knows what the hell she's doing here. The situation is far, far too complicated as it is. They're stuck, and she isn't sure what direction to take, where to go.

"I think that the best option here would be to follow Summit Rules," she suggests calmly. "I will even allow you to choose the location."

Zabuza grips her shoulder in warning, but she's out of options here. She's out of her depth, and Summit Rules means that while there is a nonaggression understanding, first one to wound another party forfeits any right to life and limb. Weapons are allowed, but speech is the main form of communication, not fists. Any preset traps, seals, or barriers will be taken down prior to meeting.

Allowing Hatake to choose the location gives him a small measure of control. He needs to have something in this situation, because she can't dominate it if she wants a good outcome. Hatake is her friend, for fuck's sake, not an arrogant diplomat or enemy.

Still, Ryuishi is sick with nerves as it is. She wants Zabuza and Haku nowhere near their would-be killer, and she never wanted it to turn out like this. She never imagined that her secrets would spill out like this at all.

"I need to convene with my team," Hatake tells her coolly, and she nods in understanding. She expected nothing else.

"We will remain within sight," she informs him, because no way is she letting them just run. This is a hot mess that needs to be cleaned

up as soon as possible, or it will fester and rot. Misunderstandings will ruin working relationships and destroy bonds.

Not only that, but she should probably explain to Haku and Zabuza why she knows Kakashi of the Sharingan and Naruto, which is going to involve a complicated retelling of their history. She doesn't see this going very well, especially when she tells them that he is her handler, and the boy is basically a political bomb.

When she makes a mess, she certainly doesn't do it half way, she thinks. This is a fucking disaster.

The groups seclude themselves like some twisted mimicry of rival sports teams, a hundred yards apart and huddled together. She can only hope that Hatake has just as much trouble as she does.

Kakashi squats in front of his genin team, facing the trio of missing nin, and he curses Watanabe's birth. He casts a glare over to the woman to blame, and the urge to harm her wells up in his chest.

For a second she meets his gaze with pleading dark eyes. Her team surrounds her, and though he can't fully see the third member, obscured by her own body, he can see the pale hand holding hers, and the swordsman's palm braced carefully on her shoulder.

Idiot, he thinks to himself. She's been socializing with the jinchuuriki, your sensei's son. You let this happen, you should have know, all your fault -

"Uzumaki Naruto," he calls out quietly, in the same commanding voice he used as ANBU captain. The boy tears his eyes away from the other group and faces Kakashi, and there is confusion and frustration written over his face.

"How do you know the missing-nin Watanabe Ryuishi?" Kakashi asks.

"Who?" the boy chirps, and Sakura looks about an inch away from throttling him.

"The female with dark hair beside the swordsman," Kakashi clarifies. Naruto, appalled to learn his nee-san's name for the first time ever, makes a twisted face.

"I found her in a dumpster," the boy states again, and this clarifies exactly nothing for him. *Why? Why a dumpster?*

"In as few words as possible, explain what she is to you," Kakashi orders.

"My nee-san," the boy chirps with obvious affection, and that... isn't good. His sensei's son shouldn't know her, let alone claim a familial relation with her.

"I took her home with me, because I wanted a pet, and she cooked me dinner and cleaned my apartment. She isn't there all the time, but she doesn't forget," Naruto explains nervously.

Was I poisoned? Kakashi thinks deliriously. *Is this a hallucination?*

"Naruto, are you saying you found someone in the trash, and just brought them home with you?" Sakura asks, and there is a tone of incredulousness that Kakashi sympathizes with.

"Well, I was four, and she had tan skin and really long hair like the fairies in a book I had, so I thought she was one," the exuberant boy explains sheepishly, flailing his arms. "I brought her home, because even though Jiji said I couldn't have a pet, he never said I couldn't have a fairy, so it doesn't count and I can't get in trouble for it."

Kakashi wonders why, exactly, he feels surprised. Is it because she started socializing with him so young? Because she was in a dumpster in Konoha for a yet unexplained reason?

"I mean, obviously I don't think she's a fairy anymore, but I just always called her that, so now it's stuck. She's not in trouble, is she? Because you said some really mean things earlier about her, and she's not like that. She read me stories and cooked me food, and she bought me toys when no one else would. She taught me like, everything, and she makes really good pillow forts," defends the boy eagerly, and Kakashi does not know what to do with this new information, because by the sounds of it, Watanabe raised the boy.

Where was the Sandaime? Where was anybody? He said four, and that is a long, long time for this to go unnoticed.

"Naruto, did she ever ask you anything? Pass you any letters, give you any presents, things to give to somebody else? Tell you anything about Konoha?"

The boy seems to think for a moment, and then seems to come upon an answer, because he removes his weapons pouches and hands them over.

"She was gone a lot, so sometimes she would ask me what I did when she was gone, or what I wanted to do. When I entered the Academy, she gave me these, and there are some things she bought me when I was younger. The ball popped forever ago, and I outgrew most of the clothes, but I still use these."

Kakashi takes the pouches from the boy and inspects them carefully for seals or poisons, but there is nothing. It's just a set of high quality weapons and pouches. He's going to inspect the apartment when they get back, but for now nothing seems to be out of place.

He hands them carefully back.

"Wait, are you telling me you never wondered where she went, or what she did?" Sasuke demands imperiously.

Naruto scratches the back of his neck awkwardly after placing his pouches back, and he looks at the ground. He mumbles out

something incoherent, and Sakura blinks in surprise.

"What?" Kakashi asks.

"I said I thought she was a whore," he says quietly. "Because when I was little she took me to an Okiya and introduced me to Misaki-nee and the others, and they took care of me when she couldn't. I just assumed she was one who had clients out of Fire Country."

"You were raised by prostitutes and a missing-nin?" Sasuke asks, his voice breaking with the sheer surprise of that statement.

"It's not like anybody else was there," grumbles Naruto. "Jiji stopped by sometimes, but they were the ones who took care of everything. When shops chased me out and everybody else called me names and stuff, they took care of me."

Minato, Kushina, forgive me, Kakashi prays silently with no small amount of hysteria. I left your son to be raised by sex workers and a dangerous political leader.

What was the Sandaime thinking? When Kakashi asked he was assured Naruto was being taken care of, but it sounds to him like the boy was thrown to the wolves and ostracized.

Thinking of the situation back home makes his head hurt. There is no clean way to do this. Naruto cares deeply for the people that raised him, and if they move against them, than they risk tearing away the social structure of the jinchuuriki. The family of said child. Knowing Naruto, there is no way they can do that without creating a resentment that the boy will carry for his own village.

He needs to speak with Jiraiya.

"Which Okiya was it, Naruto?" Kakashi asks, rubbing his temples.

"The fifth one in the south district, in across from Shinji's gambling house," he answers. His blue eyes dart over to where the other three

are huddled together, and he watches them for a moment before fidgeting nervously. When he turns back, Kakashi is face with wide, worried blue eyes.

"She has so many scars sensei," he says quietly, "She always wore a kimono and a ribbon around her neck, so I didn't... What happened to her?"

Kakashi inhales, and he knows there is no way to answer that. Three genin look up at him with various expressions, and he knows there is no way out of this. She has too much sway, too much hold that she never should have had. It is either criminal idiocy that led them to where they are today, or dangerous levels of incompetence.

"How did she know your name?" asks Sakura, ever observant, and he grits his jaw again. He can withhold the truth, but these three aren't stupid. They already know something is there.

"Everything said here today is a matter of national security," he intones seriously, and he hears their sharp intake of breath. "You will not so much as breathe a word of this to those outside this group or the Hokage himself. Failure to do so will result in permanent suspension or elimination as a threat to Konoha. Do you understand?"

He's glad to see three slow nods, but he wonders if they know how serious this is. They are fresh graduates with only a handful of D-ranks among them. There's no way they understand just how out of their depth they are, or how much havoc could be wrought on her say-so.

"Watanabe Ryuishi holds political clout, economic wealth, and intelligence that could be of great value to the Land of Fire. I was assigned as her handler eight years ago," he tells them. It's as close to the truth as he can get without revealing her status as the Rakki Ryuu. The last thing they need is to complicate everything further than it already is.

"So she's a missing-nin who works for us?" Sasuke tries to clarify, but Kakashi shakes his head. Life would be far simpler if she did work for them, but no. Watanabe worked with them at times, but never for them.

"I don't get it," admits Sakura. "She's a missing-nin, *and* she's an asset? Is she a good guy or bad guy?"

Kakashi wishes he could answer that, he honestly does. Is she a missing-nin after a jinchuuriki, or a Hokage's son? Is this her weakness showing again, the constant need he has seen in her to nurture and care for something? Is this her devious design, or her sentimental heart? Is it a cunning plan, or a chance happening that led them where they are today?

He has the uncomfortable feeling that it might happen to be some strange mixture of all of the above, because she never could do anything straightforward.

He looks over to where her group is, and like she can feel his scrutiny, she turns to meet his gaze. The stifling heat beats down on them, and the buzzing of insects fill the air, but for a moment he sees her. The girl that came to him beaten and bruised, that slept on his couch and made him food. He thinks of the woman that preened over his hair, and wound herself around him as she slept.

He holds her eyes, and he wonders with a sinking feeling if this is what it feels like to be compromised.

"She's my nee-san," a quiet voice says decisively.

Kakashi turns to look at the boy, and there is fire gleaming in his eyes, determination like he hasn't seen since the death of his own sensei many years ago.

"Naruto, don't be an idiot, she's a missing-nin," Sasuke tells him bluntly.

"She's killed people and done horrible things," Kakashi agrees, because the boy is too close to her and needs to know the truth. "She's manipulative. She could be using you."

The blond boy bristles and he grits his teeth, his hands curling into fists at his side. "Maybe I didn't know her name, and maybe she's done bad things," Naruto allows. "Yes, she's hanging around some jerk with no eyebrows, and she never told me a lot of stuff, but nee-san was the first to recognize me. She was there when nobody else was, and when everyone said I was nothing, nee-san said I was something!"

Guilt gnaws at Kakashi, because *that should have been him*. He should have been the one to help Naruto when he was down. He should have been there to recognize him, to raise him.

"Naruto..." Sakura says softly.

"No!" he protests, and his bottom lip quivers just the slightest bit. "She always came back, and she never forgot me. She never asked me to do anything but be me, and now you guys keep calling her a missing-nin like that makes her less of a person!"

Silence reigns for a few moments after his outbursts, and his teammates look at him with sympathy. Even Sasuke seems to hold some sort of empathy in his gaze, but perhaps the boy is projecting his discovery of Itachi's own betrayal onto this situation.

"Ahhh," sighs Kakashi, his thoughts swimming. "What a mess."

The genin turn to him as one unit, and he slumps his shoulders and slouches over. He has the authority here, and the decision is his own to make. They can't run, they can't fight, and his students are all fired up.

"I know enough for now," he says. Enough to justify negotiations in the field at least, and definitely enough to start asking questions when they return.

"You three follow my orders. Remember that you are ninja of Konoha first and foremost, and maybe this won't end in blood."

He hopes it doesn't, because he can't tell who would be bleeding in the first place, and he doesn't like any of the options presented.

Kakashi motions for them to get into formation and remain quiet, and he turns to the three unknowns. He wonders why if it was always going to come to this, or if there was another way. Maybe if Watanabe had just been born in Konoha-

He clears his head. There's no use in dreaming. It is what it is, and he just has to try and control it as best as he can, and hope that this time he doesn't lose somebody else.

AN: So we have a lot going on here. We have Two world colliding, Ryuishi being eased out of a panic attack by Haku and Zabuza, and Kakashi caught by professionalism. Sasuke projects Itachi's betrayal on Naruto, Sakura is bewildered as shit, and Naruto love his nee-san even if she kept secrets. Zabuza is about the least surprised out of the group, mostly because Zabuza knew Ryuishi when she flipped her shit and left Kiri. This is small fry. Haku cares for Ryuishi, and has a bigger impact on coming chapters.

For anyone who wants to call me out for being unreasonable in the next chapters, let me tell you I will be so salty with you. Human nature is iffy, Ryuishi changed hell a shit, politics are played, and the original series made me ask tons of questions that have no answer.

Bless my lurkers, my favoriters and followers. May those who review find themselves in an oddly wonderful and fantastic situation that gives them a story to tell for the rest of their lives.

Give thanks to the great Beta Enbi. Without her, my the next three chapters could not have been created. I was so lost on

how everybody would react to all this, and having her there to talk to was amazing, and she helped me out so much. Honestly, writing these chapters was like fighting a bear.

Question: What do you think is happening in the background in the elemental nations at this time? OR What the fresh hell are the Akatsuki doing? OR What would life have been like if Ryuishi insisted on raising Naruto with the help of Kakashi?

In Which Things get Complicated

I do not own Naruto. Warning for convoluted plots and emotions.

Ryuishi is caught in a strange emotional and mental state, halfway between bubbling hysteria and bone-deep apathy. A large part of her is thrown into utter and complete panic, alarm bells ringing inside her head and claxons crying out, *Danger, danger, you done fucked up* . Another, equally large part, is tired and doesn't care anymore, because she's sick of hiding and fighting like this. And underneath those is the desperate, hungry whisper that hisses inside her mind like poison, telling her to give up and let loose. To show Hatake and his genin brats exactly just how low she can go.

The temptation doesn't make any sense, but she doesn't have a way out of this, and everybody already thinks she's a monster. She's a criminal, a missing-nin, a traitor, and a liar, but oh, she could be so much worse. She could be empty and hollow, demanding to be filled with blood and suffering. She could sate herself not on desire for change and spreading affection, but raw destruction and primal carnage.

She carefully submerges it beneath her conscious thoughts, because as frustrated and angry as she is, giving in like that is going to help exactly *jack shit* . It wouldn't even be aimed at the right targets, because she *loves* Naruto, for fuck's sake, and she has some pretty serious affection for Hatake as well. Not to mention, Team Seven is made of little more than babies right now, and it would be seriously fucked up. Like, so fucked up.

Still, she's kind of already sick of Zabuza's completely unimpressed and entirely judgemental expression. Like he could have done any better as a fresh traitor building an empire and making connections with an established military power. Hatake was a good fucking

choice as an in, and as a friend. Her dearest partner can take his disapproving glare and shove it up his ass.

And Haku can stop giving her those big ol' eyes because alright, she gets it, she kinda fucked up. Hatake is her handler, and Ryuishi sometimes snuck away to hang out with him and Tenzō, and maybe she should have said something sooner. She probably also shouldn't have made contact with the adorable child of her heart, who also happened to be the Nine-Tails' jinchuuriki.

But whoops, there it is. She did. She doesn't regret anything but the fact she got caught.

... On second thought, that's actually a big fat lie, because she has a lot of guilt for the little things. She's sorry she ever deluded herself into thinking that Naruto could be just a tool, but she was sorry about that forever ago, when the assassins came for Gaara and she realized how much she loved the little buggers. She's sorry that Hatake is placed where he is now, because he is a good man, and she cares for him. She's sorry she isn't actually a god that can fix everything, and that she is a disappointment. She's sorry she can't wave her magic wand and make everything stop being so complicated.

Ryuishi is mad apologetic up in this jungle town. It's crazy.

To make everything worse, Hatake looks about as underwhelmed as can be, like he isn't surprised in the least. She's known him long enough to know his facial expressions, and while there is the tightness around his eyes that suggests that he is thoroughly pissed, he isn't surprised. Like he expected her to be garbage, to betray him.

Maybe it's his perfect poker face, but she's really starting to get fed up with how messed up everything is. Sure, she's a scheming, lying bitch. Yes. Okay. She knows she's a disappointment. *She gets it.* But he has another thing coming if he thinks she's the worst thing out there. In the realm of cloaks and daggers, beneath the thin veneer of protection that the Elemental Nations and distant Kages provide,

there are people who make her look like a monk. A surprising amount of which come from his fucking village.

Hatake wants answers, that much is plain to see. Fine. She'll give him answers, honest ones, and then he can deal with maybe a quarter of the stress she's been dealing with.

Ryuishi sucks in a long, steadying breath and holds it for a moment before letting it out.

Seven in, hold four, seven out.

Okay.

"Can you handle this?" Zabuza intones, because though he's a bastard, he still cares. He can see the cold blankness creeping around her eyes and the loose, dangerous way she's holding herself. A snake coiled and ready to strike, or a wall about to crumble.

"I kind of have to, don't I?" she responds quietly.

Haku steps in closer to them both, and his pale hands find their own. Like some dumb movie, he weaves his fingers into their own, linking them together. He holds her hand just like he holds Zabuza's, and he brings them together, one big bunch of fingers and hands.

"It will be okay," the boy says, and Ryuishi just about cries, because their Haku is such a sweet, lovely boy. He is more than she could have ever dreamed. He is a calm, centering peace in the chaos, and oh, how she loves him so.

"I always got you nerds," she agrees quietly.

"I still don't know what that word means," Zabuza says, and she can't help the smile on her face. Okay, she's a fuckup, but these two accept her anyway. She can do this. She can't change what's already said, but she can use this opportunity somehow. This is a

crazy disaster, but she refuses to just sit down and take it anymore. She's already lost too much.

"Just let me do the talking, okay?" she requests. She feels Haku squeeze her palm lightly, and Zabuza's scarred knuckles brush across her own in their weird pile of interlocked appendages.

"It does seem to what you are best at," Haku tells her with a smile. That boy is far too good at sweetly veiled insults.

"Unless it comes to combat," interjects Zabuza, and they all nod. There's almost no point in voicing it, even. Zabuza has the most experience leading a group of ninja in combat and directing them on a field. It's his area of expertise, and she won't deny it.

"Don't pick a fight we don't want," Haku warns, because they all know Zabuza.

"I don't like the way the Copy-nin is looking over here," Zabuza grumbles in his own defense.

Ryuishi looks over to see what he is speaking of, and there is this strange moment of eye contact. It's long and drawn out, and totally weird, and she just wishes that they lived in a world where she felt safe introducing her friends to her other friends. One where there wasn't a high probability of them literally attempting to beat the shit out of each other.

Her eyes dart downwards to the young boy with whiskered cheeks and sunkissed skin. His bottom lip juts out, and there is a wistful, yearning expression on his face that makes her want to run to him.

Unfortunately, that's the sort of desire that got her into this mess in the first place.

"There's an empty warehouse five streets away," Hatake announces drolly, and she nods. She knows the one he is talking about, but she doesn't know how he knows about it. Unsurprisingly, it's the furthest

from the river, which is their strongest terrain type, should it come to combat.

"Is your team qualified to handle sensitive information?" she asks. She knows the answer is a definite 'no', but she just wants to remind him of that.

"They are ninja of Konoha," he replies. The answer is a non-answer, but also an adamant statement of how much he trusts her. Which is not at all, because he would rather drag genin into this mess that leave them behind in case she's set up an ambush.

It's a lose-lose situation all around.

"Tandem approach," he declares after a moment. She nods again, because that means no one leads and no one follows. He's not showing his back, and he knows she won't either.

The squads move, and his team is set in a classic Meiji formation around him, while hers is in a wedge formation on either side of Haku. It's tense and awkward, but she's losing patience very quickly with all this stress. She's stretched thin as it is, because this was supposed to be a simple publicity tour, not a diplomatic minefield. She's worked to the bone just managing as much as she is.

Not to mention, Haku is basically dragging her and Zabuza along by their joined hands, like he's some sort of parent guiding his reluctant children. As if she and Zabuza will either split at a moment's notice or spark a fight if left to their own devices.

Ugh. She hates that he's so responsible. Where did he get it from?

She keeps her pace placid and controlled regardless of her emotions, conflicted and wayward as they are. Her body is hers to control, not the other way around. The streets clear out at some point, thick mud done over with plywood and gravel so that heavy loads won't sink. The only sound is that of the constant ambient jungle noises, and the genin's muffled footsteps. They are not a

stealth team in the least. The warehouse door appears, and Hatake herds his genin in first, keeping an eye on her team the whole time, like he's expecting them to attack a trio of twelve year olds. He backs through the door last, his eye glued to her, demanding and unimpressed.

"I don't like him," mumbles Haku.

"He's an ass," she agrees quietly. "But like, not as bad as Zabuza."

Said man lifts his leg high enough to kick her in the calf with his muddy foot. She takes it silently, but the look of disgust she shoots him as she enters the building could speak volumes. She's already wearing filth on her jeans, why in the world does he have to fucking rub it into the material? He's just proving her point, that's what he's doing.

Inside the warehouse, it's blessedly cool. It's not a refrigeration storage, but many other goods are temperature and moisture sensitive. This must be a warehouse for things like papers, inks, and dried goods. Whatever it is, Zabuza practically hums as he steps inside the wall of cool air, and Haku seems to shift in comfort as well, his fake, placid smile fixed on his face like a threat.

They find themselves in across from the Konoha team, which Kakashi has stepped away from, standing in front of them like the elected official. Again, she follows his lead. It takes some serious silent conversations between her and Zabuza, with a lot of eye contact and facial expressions, but eventually she is allowed to step forward without the other two closing rank around her.

Then it's her and Haka, barely a half a meter apart, while their two separate groups stand several yards behind them.

"Explain yourself, Watanabe," Hatake orders quietly, and oh good, it's going to be a whisper war then. Because talking almost below the human range of hearing is *totally* going to keep these secrets safe and work well.

"Why were you socializing with one of Konoha's citizens without approval?" he demands, and she can't help but roll her eyes.

"So sorry, didn't know I needed the Sandaime Hokage's permission to not be a piece of shit and help out a child," she retorts blithely, equally as quiet.

Hatake slides forward almost imperceptibly, leaving less than a foot between them, and she hears the warning creak of Zabuza gripping his weapon. Surely Hatake must hear it too, but he doesn't back off, leaning in close.

"I don't believe for a second that your continued interaction with *him*, of all children, is incidental," he accuses lowly. She can practically feel the threat in his voice, and her instinct cries out that he is *dangerousdangerousdangerous* .

"You run an information network, collecting secrets like a magpie collects things that shine, and I know you," he drawls. His face is lazy and unaffected, but she knows this asshole too. She knows how lethal he can be, and how he likes to say things without actually stating them.

You know he's the jinchuuriki, he accuses beneath his talk. *If not more* .

"I do now," she lies. There was no way for her to know before, or at least, there is no provable way for her to have known then. Half-truths and subtleties are her specialty, after all. "But back then, he was a four year old wandering the streets alone in ill-fitting clothes. He was a tiny brat who would have died if it was Kiri, talking to strange women in dumpsters with no sense of self preservation. He was obviously in need of care. No guardians, no protectors, nobody."

"Unimportant," he says slowly. "You know now what interacting with him means. Your actions could spark a war."

For a second she snaps, because that threat is far too much. Her control slips for just a moment, and her fury hold her captive. How *dare* he dismiss the fact that Naruto was alone? How *dare* he threaten her? How *dare* he come into her territory, and persecute her for caring for a child!

It's a fraction of a moment, but it's enough for her killing intent to spike, hard and fast, her tainted chakra following quickly behind it. Half a second is all it takes to permeate the air around them all like a threat, until the heaving, whimpering sounds of Team Seven give her just enough determination to bottle that anger up.

Her eyes dart over to the group, and she sees them staring at her, wide-eyed and afraid. Little bodies quiver, made sick by the potency of her murderous desire and the Void inside her chakra. Too much for young ones so guarded from death, so ignorant to the path they have chosen.

The absolute fear in Naruto's eyes hurts the most, though, because she never wants to see that look on his face. She wants to protect him from terrors and shadows in the night, not become his nightmare.

She wrangles in the guilt as well, turning her gaze back to Hatake, who is more than skilled enough to caught the whole exchange and still look unaffected. Curiouser, maybe, but still detached.

Ryuishi is insanely jealous of his control.

" *Hatake Kakashi*," she hisses, low and deadly, leaning closer as well, leaving only inches between them, "I have *never* acted against your nation, but for some reason, your country has never stopped interfering with my business. For years I've let your nosing around and digging into my business slide. I've allowed you to try to place plants within my ranks, and watched them fail. I've stood by and let the confrontations between Konoha-nin and my enforcers be nothing more than isolated incidents, because the laws of the land say that me and mine are scum and your forces are simply following protocol.

Konoha has been pushing for *years*, and because the cost of it was so low, it passed by without uproar. I expected it, accepted the fact that the Village Hidden in the Leaves wanted to destroy me no matter how much information and benevolence I have shown them. It was the same harassment that Hidden Villages give each other all the time."

She can feel his breath against her face, hot and muggy in the cool air. She can smell the weirdness of it, not food or drink, just Hatake, and she can see his grey eye watching her carefully.

"I am the least of your village's worries, yet it insists on riding my ass like I'm the biggest threat out there. Ame defectors are on the loose for the first time in years, implying that they are taking action after an age of stillness. Kumo has enough military might and economic clout it could smash just about anybody. In the shadows, deals are being struck, and a rogue group is gearing up to make my power look amateur in comparison. In your own village, there is a threat looming, someone has been cranking out infiltrators raised like I was, in the fashion of the Mist's old graduation exams," she continues, her words barely a husky whisper at this point, made breathless and quiet by her frustration. Her anger simmers in her veins, controlled and bent to her will.

His lazy, half-lidded eye sharpens, searching her features for mistruth or signs of misdirection. But there is only determined fury, desperate and tired. He can smell it on her, the weariness, the strain, and the passion she has for her words.

"I am tired, Hatake, and stretched too thin as it is. You stand here in front of me threatening war because I found a little boy, hurting and obviously alone, and I helped him when *no one else was*. You would make the world pay in blood for the fact that Konoha cannot care for its own," she bites out, and his eyes dart down to where her teeth clack together on the last syllable. He feels guilt rear inside of him, heavy and ugly. Konoha can care for its own, and it should be doing that, why wasn't it? Where was he, when his sensei's son was being coddled by a criminal?

He quashes the feeling with practiced ease. Now is not the time for such things. He needs to stay focused and sharp. Watanabe is clever, and if he allows it, she will lead him through half truths and rhetoric without remorse.

"If that's true, then why didn't you inform me sooner?" he asks, drawing his gaze back up to deep black eyes. They are narrowed in frustration, framed by long lashes and lines of coal, dangerous but honest.

"*I have been,*" she forces out through gritted teeth. "You're supposed to be a genius. Look over the files I've given you, and find the patterns. You can cross-check them again, and find resources of your own for reliability. The missing-nin from Yugakure with white hair, Akasuna no Sasori, Iwa's Mad Bomber, the rumors of the break in negotiations in Ame, the missing children from all over, and the stolen scrolls containing powerful Jutsu. S-rank missing nin don't just disappear like that, Hatake, they don't fall off the map. Whole countries don't just seal their borders. Children don't just disappear. I've been throwing information at you in piles for years as carefully as I can, because not even I am unwatched."

Kakashi takes a moment to evaluate that statement. He has read many of the files she has handed in, and the information she has obtained has always led to completed missions. It's sound almost to a fault.

He knows the missing-nin files she's speaking of, high rank and very, very sparse on details. He knows some of the rumors as well, but it's hard to pinpoint because of the assortment of information she always seemed to bring. In recent years it seemed like she wasn't giving as good of quality, but now he realizes that it wasn't that she wasn't holding back. She was obscuring it, important details spread thin over periods of time and numbers of reports, pieces to be put together.

That time in the bar when she informed him and Tenzo that she would be coming less, before disappearing into the crowds like a

phantom.

Watch the information I give you .

The drug smuggling operation years back, when they stumbled across her doing business, but peeled back because of the political ramifications.

Welp, one of us is going to have to leave. I can't be seen with you .

All of her hints, so subtle over such long periods of time. Her ending statement in that same warehouse, during that same bust, when he asked for certain information.

Maybe you should just take a better look at the information I already give you.

Kakashi could shout in his sudden frustration, because how could he not pick up on it, all her clues and tips? Her careful behavior, her seeming incoherence and madness? She was complicated, yes, but she was clever and not entirely despicable. He knew that.

If any of this is true, then he needs to double time that order to speak with Jiraiya.

His eyes dart over to the team behinds her, the scowling swordsman he doesn't trust, and the youth half-hidden behind him.

"You said you were being watched," he breathes quietly. His hand reaches up slowly to grasp her waist just in case they both need to move. He is beyond annoyed with her, but if any of this holds just a single grain of truth, then she is more of an asset than before.

He always thought of Watanabe as a free radical, chaotic and without a lead. She didn't seem the type to take orders well, but he could have been wrong. There might be another holding her leash, a chain around her throat alongside that scar.

It's an unpleasant thought. How much of what she does is instinct, and how much is planned? If she does have a master, who are they, and how much can they control?

She looks at his face, then scrunches her features in momentary confusion. They smooth over again, and she shakes her head.

"Not those two. I'll admit that I didn't exactly want you to meet, but that's because I'm afraid you'll kill each other," she whispers. "There are few people I trust at all, and those two behind me are included. Surprisingly, so are you."

It goes without saying that he may not exactly reciprocate that.

"Why Naruto?" he inquires, remaining on the topic.

"Because I am weak," she admits, and it startles him. "Because even though I thought I could use him when I found out, the more time I spent with him, the more I realized that couldn't. I don't even want him to be a shinobi, I want him to be safe and happy and cared for. But he made his choices, and I won't take that away from him. He wears the headband of the Leaf, he swore his oaths, he is yours."

"But why didn't you tell me?" he pries. They've known each other for years. She had to at know he would have looked into it.

Judging by the look on her face, fierce and bewildered, she didn't.

"I..." she murmurs, and then there is a flash of bitterness and resentment on her features before it is smoothed away. "I didn't even think to."

"I need more than that," he tells her. He does. He wants to understand, he needs to.

"I mean, I'm just an asset," she says, tilting her head closer so her words are barely a whisper. "I'm only alive because you find me useful, because I have information and things your village wants. I'm

not dumb. I know that. One slip up I can't explain, or one mistake that you deem too much, and you will join the ranks of people who would be glad to see me dead. So why would I tell you I cared about the well-being of a little boy in your village when you would either use him against me, or kill me for loving him?"

Kakashi freezes, a little appalled. Is that what she thinks? That Konoha can get rid of her just like that? If it was that simple they would have broken her already, secrets stripped from her mind by force, and body destroyed.

She's the Rakki Ryuu. She has countries looking up at her, as a figure and symbol. She has sway on trade that Konoha needs to survive, and gangs of kekkei genkai users roaming around the continent. She has more contacts than he can imagine. She's changing everything around her like a typhoon, and she thinks that Konoha can just eliminate her without repercussion?

He examines her face for the truth behind it, because it seems like a ridiculous lie. Yet, even as close as they are, her pulse is even, she has no twitches, no jumps in chakra, and no tells.

How paranoid is she? How long has she been clinging to secrets and isolation that she never even thinks of sharing them?

Then again, her intense paranoia may have been what's keeping her alive.

(- *kill me for loving him*, he hears on another level. Not caring, not raising, but loving the boy. Watanabe knows it's a weakness that can be exploited just as much as he does, but she has a heart that no shinobi should. He's seen her eye the children of his village as they play on the streets, with dull longing and masked expressions. He knows the way she interacts with him and Tenzō, too familiar and caring by far. She's compromised, and she always has been. She uses apathy and distraction as a shield, but he knows her. He knows the bleeding heart she nurses. She craves for affection like a stray, but never deems herself good enough for it. Only to give.

It's something they use against her to this day. Her want to nurture, to please, to form bonds. It makes it hard to be professional, to be sure, but it also ensures that she won't look to other villages for a better deal. Not when her heart is in Konoha.

Oh, how it has turned against them. Her heart is in Konoha, yes, but not just in Tenzō and him. It's in Naruto as well. Not only that, but she has a team behind her, and she cares for them as well. It tastes bitter in his mouth, his own manipulative actions, and her own diverse affections.)

"What do you want, Watanabe?" he asks her plainly, suddenly feeling tired. What does she get from all these intricate webs, and all of these secrets?

For a moment it looks like she wants to slump against him and just stay there. He feels her weight shift, her waist still in his grasp, her muscles firm beneath his fingertips.

"I want something to change," she murmurs, so soft he almost strains to hear it. "I want to not be constantly afraid that my team might be attacked, or that a Hidden Village will use them as leverage against me. I want the children I have come across to be safe and happy. I want to stop getting harassed on all sides, constantly doubted."

She looks up at him again, her hair shifting ever so slightly. Her expression is open, bare as she tries to get her message across.

"I want to have allies, not a handler. Equals, not tools. I don't want to keep fighting alone with my team against the whole world," she says.

He considers it, and silence reigns. It is intense, and he needs to turn this in. She has to stop having contact with Naruto, she knows it as well as he does. The boy's loyalty can't be skewed in two directions.

If her information is honest, and he goes back to find it is... well, then there are more answers he needs. Like why the Hokage never was truthful about Naruto, or who has been sanctioning missions to infiltrate her ranks. As her handler, he should have been consulted first for efficiency's sake if nothing else, it was just logical. What is this threat in Konoha she's speaking of, and is there really a group of powerful rogues joining together?

He needs Konoha's spymaster. This needs to be confirmed first.

"Are they gonna kiss, 'ttebayo?" interrupts a loud voice in a horrible whisper. "Because they're standing really close, looking at each other and whispering, and it looks like they're gonna kiss."

He watches the woman close her eyes in sudden, bone-deep exasperation, and he is struck by a moment of empathy. He feels that way almost constantly with these children.

" *They are not going to kiss,* " interjects another, unfamiliar voice with far too much vehemence on the subject.

He takes the time to match the voice with the unknown figure, and assumes that the newcomer does not appreciate the assertion that his student made. The pale face poking out from behind the shirtless swordsman is young and angular, with a fine bone structure. Androgynous and statuesque, they can't be more than fifteen, and they look ready to fight. Big, furious eyes framed by thick lashes dart between the his hand on Watanabe and the taller adult male in the room, as if wondering when justice will be taken for the slight.

He feels an echo of yesterday, a pressure building in his temples. She's been hiding a youth from him as well. Watanabe hid the fact that she was associating with one child, and was rearing another at home. She probably has a brood, he thinks exasperatedly. Because that's what every missing-nin should do, go and find wayward toddlers to care for.

The swordsman, at least, only seems concerned with safety at the moment, his stance ready to dart out with his blade. He only needs a signal, and Kakashi is sure he would rush to her defense.

"Hatake, what if we grab Zabuzza and just ditch the kids. We acted like adults and did this maturely, right? Are we done now? Can we go drinking?" the missing-nin asks in a hushed, pained voice.

The offer is very tempting. He imagines a rogue like her would know some interesting spots in the area, and a night spent imbibing with a political leader and one of the Seven Swordsmen of the Mist promises to be interesting. Maybe even legendary.

Unfortunately, he is on a mission, and he has a moral obligation to see it through. "We still need to talk," he says, almost apologetic.

"You're damn right we do. I can give you an address so you can drop by once the tiny babies are asleep, and then the adults can converse."

"Without sake," he stipulates.

"Lao-lao it is."

"No. Watanabe, no drinking on missions."

She throws up her hands in frustration and they step away from each other, a respectable and amiable distance. It's not far enough away to be considered detached, but no longer close enough to feel each other's breaths. His hand feels a bit empty now.

"Status?" requests the swordsman loudly, and he catches the exact moment she rolls her eyes, placing a hand on her hip.

"Well, I'm in for some shit, but I think we both agree that this team is allowed to complete their mission for now. Coexistence and all that," she declares, watching him for any signs that he might disagree.

"As long as the civilians-" *your underlings*, "-are assured that this was a misunderstanding, and that Konoha meant no harm," he agrees calmly, trying to figure out this mess.

She looks like that might be a headache and a half for her, if the way she squints her eyes is anything to go by.

"Yeah, that's not so easy. I can't just will them to think a certain way," she states. "I mean, we can skew it, but if we avoid each other the whole time, it's obvious it's a farce. If you want to look friendly-"

"-then we have to be seen in your company," Kakashi finishes wearily.

Ryuishi shrugs, because it isn't a lie. She knows he doesn't want to do it, that he thinks it's putting his team in danger, but if the two groups don't interact, then everybody simply sees a tense, hostile silence. One most likely started by Konoha-nin. She isn't hugely reputable in this area, but even those who don't know exactly who she is have seen her and her team assisting with the spillways and levees for the past two days. They have the home ground advantage in the PR stunt.

Konoha really can't afford to ostracize itself.

"We're here to help out with preparations for the local flooding, so as long as your mission doesn't involve-" she starts, but looking at Kakashi's drawn expression, she knows that's exactly why they've come as well. Which is strange, but she'll figure out the reason later. Her head hurts, and she just doesn't give a flying fuck anymore. Whatever happens will happen. She's going to do what she was before they came, and Hatake can either adapt or not.

She takes a deep breath, closes her eyes, and tries to find an answer. Any answer, any at all.

If her team leaves, then it looks like his team pushed her out. If his team leaves, then it looks like her team threatened them off and has

possible grudges against Konoha. If both of them stay but work separately, somebody's going to pick up on how they are avoiding each other, especially if they're working on the same project. Working together comes with the weirdest set of dangers and challenges she could ever conceive. She's blanking so hard because it hurts even trying to imagine what that would look like.

Allied shinobi and missing-nin only work together if there is a common enemy, or if the allied ninja has a use for said missing-nin. It's just illogical. Why work with a criminal, unless that criminal has something you want? People like her and Zabuza are always around, but they are... well, nobody likes to face the fact that not every shinobi remains loyal to a village. It's like some unimaginable stigma in the Elemental Nations. No matter how fucked up your village is, or how shitty things get, ninja are supposed to stand by their homes.

Which is stupid, in her opinion, because that would be like hanging around somebody you blatantly dislike because they said you should. No fucking way. Yet, that's how it is, and it's weird for her to even be around an allied team of ninja without a fight having broken out yet. Like, gut-wrenching, head hurting weird. Somebody should be bleeding by now. It's the natural order of things.

Not even the fact that Hatake is her handler should have stopped it. The man is pretty much beholden to kick her ass to set an example for his team, right? Isn't that correct? Did she misunderstand something?

Ugh, she doesn't know what is right and it's killing her.

"Is... is there protocol for this?" she asks loudly, hoping somebody else might know for once. She catches Zabuza looking at his sword pointedly before looking back at her and she send him a contemptuous look. No, they are not fighting, but also, she understands. It would make sense if they did.

"Missing-nin are to be neutralized if they stand to interfere with mission orders," a determined voice answers. It's shaky, but there is a threat there she would be stupid to miss.

Ryuishi's dark eyes slowly slide to the source, and the boy's stubbornly set face practically screams *trying too hard*. Looking at him brings back memories of dark-eyed babies cradled close to her chest, and a young boy around his age with the weight of the world on his shoulders.

Sasuke glares at her, but Ryuishi has spent her life in hard places with harder people, and a child's attitude is nothing to her.

"Hmmm. Where I come from," she says, "a subordinate speaking threats to somebody his superior is treating with would be grounds for punishment."

Zabuza actually snorts at her words, his eyes glued to the boy as well.

"There's no reason to be treading with missing-nin in the first place," he fires back, and she actually wants to laugh. That's village prejudice and naïveté speaking out of the mouth of a child. Villages tread with missing-nin more than they admit, when that ninja has something that they want. Iwa used the Akatsuki in canon, and obviously Danzō has something with Orochimaru. Hell, Kiri was ready to bend over backwards to get to her resources even though she burned that place to the ground. They just didn't want it known that they were doing it. There was a dichotomy of what was expected (which was a fight) and what actually happened (which was headache inducing shit like this.)

Her eyes dart over to Hatake, who looks like he needs an aspirin, his eye pinched and his form slouched down. He meets her gaze, but she can see the annoyance muffled by exasperation at the child's words.

"I think you should stop talking, kiddo. You're making yourself look really immature," she states kindly, because she could do a lot worse with him. He's just a kid, he needs to be taught, not wrecked.

He bristles at her words, drawing himself up like an angry tomcat. Which is strange, because the boy she remembered in canon was calm and collected, but the one standing in front of her is thorny and easily riled. He's a big ball of anger and insecurity, she can practically taste it on him.

(Which is creepy and weird, and something she's going to blame on Orochimaru.)

"What would traitor scum like you know about-" he starts, but an arm reaches out and smacks him straight in the mouth. It's sneaky as shit, the fist comes in from his blind spot by his ear to tag him in the jaw. It's hard enough to clack teeth together and send saliva streaming out.

Behind her, she hears Zabuza's incredibly amused chortling, and she doesn't need to turn to see Haku's mean smile. But she doesn't hold the same amusement, because she's actually a little shocked. Judging by Hatake's put-upon expression, he isn't at all.

"Don't you fuckin' talk to her like that," Naruto growls, and really, it... well.

"You know, looking back on it," Hatake drawls, "it should have been obvious from his language alone that he'd had exposure to you."

She casts him a quick glance, but she's actually a little concerned. There's... there's no way Naruto should have been able to just punch Sasuke like that. Isn't there supposed to be some sort of skill difference between them? Why is he so protective?

"I'm going to destroy you," Sasuke mutters. He turns with an uppercut ready, his whole body twisting with the strike.

"Like you could before, you bastard-" but the shot connects, and it's an impressive blow (for a kid) to the solar plexus. Naruto curls around it, and she hears his wheeze.

"We are on a *mission* . I cannot *believe* you two," Sakura hisses angrily, her hands shaped like claws as she goes to bodily separate the two. Or maybe she's joining in on it, because frankly, those elbow shots look entirely on purpose. She doesn't remember Sakura being so... well, *involved* in this rivalry, but the evidence is literally right in front of her. Went that girl gets in there, she *gets in there* .

Ryuishi tears her eyes from the disaster that is Team Seven, feeling appalled, and Hatake sends her a look like he's experienced the worse depths of hell. He looks so downtrodden it's almost hilarious.

"I-" she starts, but there's really nothing she can say. This is all a bit out of hand at this point. There's certainly no standard set of actions on what to do now.

"They actually held out longer than I thought," he tells her in confidence. She wants to get him a chair and maybe let him sleep a bit. He's not the type of man that was made for this.

His lone eye wanders over her shoulder to where Haku is standing, and it looks like he's briefly jealous, in his own laid-back way.

"Yours look well-behaved," he states, and she detects the faintest traces of bitterness in his tone. For a second fear grips her, because this is Kakashi, and those are people he killed in another life, and she's so afraid it chokes her.

(It doesn't last. She doesn't let it.)

"I raised them both myself," she jokes forcefully. She knows that the silver haired jounin does not miss the momentary hitch in her voice.

"Even the big one?" he asks, and she cracks a smile.

"It was hard, to be sure, but these days he eats his vegetables and bathes all by himself," she teases. "He even keeps quiet when the adults are-"

There is a sharp sound as a stone meets the back of her skull, and she hisses, because even though she can't really feel pain too much anymore, Zabuza has a penchant for making things sting like a motherfucker. Her hand rises to feel the area, because if he made her bleed, she is going to wait until he falls asleep and kick him as hard as she can in the liver.

"Ah," Kakashi says. "I see some things they never really grow out of."

She glances up at him, then the team of genin. Sasuke has a bloody nose, Naruto is missing a hunk of hair, and Sakura has a beautiful bruise blooming on her upper shoulder. It still looks like they are trying to club each other to death with their noodly appendages and sheer force of will alone. She thinks of his words, the threat of war, and how tired she is of having to compromise for a village she isn't part of. She thinks of her fear for her team, and the conversation she knows is to come.

"Yeah," she agrees. "You're fucked, Hatake."

AN: So much is happening. A complicated mess of emotions and logic. Kakashi is still struggling, truths are revealed, and Ryuishi is just about done playing games. Haku will cut a bitch for putting hands on his mom, and Zabuza wishes this would just turn into a fight because it would be easier. Meanwhile, Team Seven tries and fails to hold it's shit together. Sasuke attempts to uphold his place as the young professional, Naruto is deeply suspicious of his sensei and his sister, and Sakura is done with their nonsense. This chapter was an incredible headache and was viewed through so many angles it gave me nausea, and I might have still missed many points. Tensions both rise and fall, and ugh, just ugh. UGH. RYUISHI AND YOURS

SUBTLE ASS CLUES, WHO IN THE FUCK IS SUPPOSED TO FIGURE THAT SHIT?

Around 7k because it makes me want to fight a ghost.

Meanwhile, in other news, I will begin updating on Mondays because of reason, and this is an early push because Enbi is kind and said we should post more than less. Love her.

Thanks to my lurkers, who are kind to read, and to my favoriters and followers. The heavens shine down on my reviewers, who leave comments and make me feel like I'm a cool person for once.

Blessed be Enbi, who has a very busy life and many great ideas and also really good eyeliner. She remains my vote for best beta 2k15, and also probably owns like a limb or something in payment for her hard work.

Question: What does Zabuza think of Kakashi and Ryuishi having a whisper war? OR What are the characters biggest secrets?

In Which Words are Had

I do not own Naruto.

Sakura slips in the mud for the fourteenth time that afternoon, her leg sliding out from underneath her, dropping her on her opposite knee. The heavy wheelbarrow in front of her thumps down yet again, and she groans, because this is crazy.

A long time ago, she might have been horrified by her state right now. In a way, she still detests it. There is a thick coat of mud on her legs and in her shoes, squishing nastily between her toes. Everything is beyond slick because of it, and the footing is treacherous at the best of times.

Not only that, but it's hot. Usually the sun doesn't bother her, but the rampant moisture of the area makes it a hundred percent worse. Her sweat isn't evaporating, and instead it simply lies on her skin, building up and clinging on. It's like wearing a wet blanket over her whole body, and she hates it. The wheelbarrow in front of her refuses to budge. It must weigh a ton, and it keeps getting stuck. There is too much weight on one little wheel, and it makes the whole cart sink down into the mire. Nothing is easy here, and the work is horrible.

What may be worse, though, is the atmosphere. Sure, they may be putting on smiles and acting friendly, but that's because Kakashi-sensei ordered them to. She knows for a fact that Naruto is anything but gleeful, and if Sasuke thinks anything like her, than he is confused as well.

It's just so... so... perplexing.

Naruto-strange, hyperactive, silly Naruto-knows a missing-nin. A famous missing-nin, from the Mist of all places. He was raised by

her, and a bunch of prostitutes apparently. The latter doesn't surprise her, because she and Ino had their suspicions before hand. Frankly, a lot of comments about pushy customers being the worse make a lot more sense now, and she finally understands why he was so hesitant to let them meet his 'nee-sans'. But they never suspected a criminal to be involved.

Only, the words 'missing-nin' and 'criminal' don't seem to be as clearly defined as she thought they would be. She understood that defection happened, and the Academy always taught that it was horrible. It was betraying everything one knew, throwing all the care and love a village held for them back into its face. It was spitting on years of tradition, generations of loyalty, and the Will of Fire itself. Every sacrifice and labor that went into a village was betrayed the moment a ninja turned their back on their home.

Therefore, she thought that missing-nin would be the worst of society. Traitors without any redeeming qualities. They were villains in childhood stories. There was nothing off limits to a defector. No task too dirty, no crime unthinkable.

Looking up, she spies the woman in question, talking with one of the civilians. She says something, and the worker laughs loudly.

She doesn't look evil, Sakura thinks. Frightening and intimidating, maybe. Her muscle tone is off-putting. It's not the slender, willowy grace that Sakura wants to have. It's lean cords underneath bronze skin, an obvious show of strength. She's littered with scars that make Sakura think of the class held on capture and interrogation. Some are thin lines, barely visible at all. Others, like the long one on her ribs, or the one peeking up from her pants, are thick and jagged, made of keloid tissue built up over time.

The scariest is the one winding around her neck.

The injuries must have hurt beyond belief, so deep and permanent. Sakura doesn't know what she had to do to survive what happened, but she wonders if she could ever face what that woman has. In

Konoha, scars only happen if medical treatment is received after the wounds have already begun to heal, or the ninja in question wants to keep it. On rare occasions, it's because the wound is too serious or deep to properly heal at all.

Sakura doesn't know which one it was for the fierce-looking woman with sharp eyes.

She shivers despite the heat, turning back to her wheelbarrow. Those eyes are scary, so dark that there is no color. Slanted and keen, they seem to stare right through everything, and Sakura sees nothing inside of them at all. No emotion, no expression-just emptiness.

Maybe the woman is helping out with the civilians, and maybe she didn't instigate conflict with their team, but Sakura feels unsure around her.

She remembers the warehouse, when suddenly she knew for certain she was going to die. Her breath catching in her throat, her muscles seizing up. She swore she could feel a gaping maw right behind her, opening wide to swallow her whole. She recalls the sharp, immediate rush of fear that had coursed through her, and how she had reacted. Her body had trembled, and she felt sick. There was something unnatural and wrong in that moment, something horrible. It had made her cry without even knowing, because she had been so certain that there was an empty void waiting to devour her.

Then Kakashi-sensei had leaned in closer, and it had stopped. Sakura wonders about him too, because as if Naruto being raised by a missing-nin wasn't strange enough, their sensei knew her as well.

She tries to heave the wheelbarrow up once again, sneaking a glance at sensei. He seems to be watching the kunoichi as well, and Sakura can't read his expression, but it is strangely intense.

Maybe she's reading too much into it, but... They stood so close together, his hand on her arm, their faces nearly touching as they

whispered things the others couldn't hear. It was almost like watching a movie, and Naruto wasn't wrong when he said what he did.

Thinking about it more, she was also very close with the tall, equally scary swordsman. They had talked afterwards, and the woman had brushed her hand across his cheek reassuringly before they left.

Sakura may be a twelve-year-old girl, but she has seen many romantic movies in theaters, and she has read many, many books. Something deep in her heart is enamored with this story.

One missing-nin, scared and hurt with a dark past. A chivalrous Konoha jounin, who takes her in from the dangers of the dark. A handler and an asset they were meant to be, for anything more was forbidden. Or a secret for only the two of them to hold close when they met. Only, a childhood teammate stands between them. She knows him as a friend, but the jounin knows him for what he really is.

Dark secrets, forbidden romance... Oh, Sakura can see it now!

I'm rooting for you, sensei! she screams inside her head.

"Hey, that looks heavy, let me get that for you," a husky voice calls out.

Sakura squeaks, whipping her head around to face the smiling visage of the exact woman she was thinking about. For a moment she is caught off guard by the way her dark eyes look, sultry and framed by long lashes, and how her smile makes her scars disappear. This close Sakura can see the sharp lines of her eyeliner, immaculate and clean even with the sweat. Her lips are still tinted as well, and Sakura wants to figure out what brand she uses. Maybe Naruto will know.

"I... I..." she stammers, but the woman lightly bumps her with her hip. Sakura releases her hold on the handles, and the woman takes

her place hefting up the heavy load with ease, her muscles tensing with the action.

"It's no problem. Can you do me a favor and tell your sensei that if he keeps fucking watching me like he expects me to snatch one of you up and run, I'm going to poison his food next time I cook him breakfast?" she asks pleasantly.

Sakura nods blankly, staring at the dark haired woman. *She cooks him breakfast*, her inner voice shouts. *I knew it, shannaro!*

"Thank you. I love your hair, by the way. It looks great."

With a smile, the woman wheels away, gliding over the mud like a dancer. Her feet don't get stuck, and she barely has any mud on her in comparison to everyone else. It takes a moment to register that Naruto's missing-nin older sister just said she had nice hair, and when she does, Sakura knows that she may be scary and intimidating, but she can't be that bad.

After all, just look at Naruto. He's the goofiest dork this side of the sea. No way somebody evil and honorless raises such a knucklehead.

Ryuishi is ignorant to Sakura's inner musings as she works. All she knows is that the kid was struggling, and that there was no harm in helping out a pubescent girl. Or, there shouldn't be. But by now, everything is so convoluted she has to stick to the barest facts if she wants to be sure of anything.

Fact one: Hatake refuses to be separated from his genin team. Which, while cute and devoted, is bullshit for logistics. This side of the river has way too many ninja now, with only Zabuza and Haku working on the other side. Not that the genin really count, but it's the principle of the thing.

Fact two: She is separated from her team, and Hatake is worried she's going to attempt something. Which is bullshit and puts her in a

bad place. Zabuza is probably going to berate her later, along with Haku. She knows that the boy hasn't stopped watching her, even though he's supposed to be helping Zabuza with the spillway on the other side. He probably even has the swordsman's blessing.

Fact three: Their groups have to be seen amicably intermingling, with emphasis on the words 'amicably', and 'intermingling'. That's far easier said than done, because Zabuza and Haku don't trust Team Seven, and Team Seven doesn't seem to trust anybody. Hatake keeps watching her as if he's waiting for her to suddenly attack while somehow also directing the building of the levee. Sasuke keeps glancing around every five seconds, very obviously keeping his distrustful eyes on her instead of mixing concrete like he's fucking supposed to, and Naruto is sending her puppy eyes from his place by his sensei's side. The only one who she has been able to make any headway with is Sakura, who seems to be attempting to move mud from place to place with little effect.

Fact four: The ninja here are wary, and the civilians are skeptical as well. Twice she has been discretely asked if her team needs 'a bit of a break to check on that project in the jungle.' Which is code for, *Here's a kindly offered out, and we will cover for you if your team needs to slip away from these Konoha bastards as thanks for trying to help us with the construction, and for also not fighting in the middle of our city.*

Words cannot express how bad Hatake is making himself look right now. The genin might have gotten away with their attitudes because they were, you know, *twelve*. Hatake, however, is an adult who seems laid back, but keeps raising his hackles every time she so much as glances in the general direction of Naruto.

She really hopes that Zabuza is fairing better than she is.

(Across the river, Zabuza keeps his eye on the other construction site, specifically the distant figure of Hatake Kakashi by the levee. He works at a furious pace, and behind him workers scramble to haul away the dirt he flings behind him mechanically.

Only Ryuishi, he thinks. Only she can make such a mess by showing her face.

He pierces the earth yet again with his shovel, his eye glued to that particular figure. Genin she can handle, but the Copy-nin is another league altogether. He's already stationed Haku on a nearby bridge as long range back up if necessary.

The civilian workers watch the large man mow through the work easily, and they joke with each other as they cart load after load of mud.

"I'd be insecure if my sister was working with a shinobi who kept eyeing her like a dog eyes a bone too."

"Sister? I thought she was his partner," responds his friend.

"I thought that he was her bodyguard," chimes in another.

Zabuza ignores them, too focused on his task.)

Honestly though, it's hard enough to keep up the smiling, helpful visage she wears when doing manual labor anyway. She doesn't need Hatake riding her ass like he is, or the little genin doing their whole schtick.

Sasuke of canon future might be able to whoop her ass to next week and back, what with all that Sharingan nonsense, but right now the tiny fucker is... well, *tiny*. He's a genin, and she has to have like, forty pounds and twelve or thirteen years of experience on him, if not more. She's fairly certain that she could take him down.

He seems to be misinformed on that fact though, because his glares are adorably confrontational in nature. It's like he's inviting her to fight with his eyes alone. Where Itachi was-and probably will forever be-a blank faced, hard-to-read individual, this Sasuke seems to scream whole sentences with his eyes alone.

She dumps out the mud at the designated area, and turns to glance at the boy in question. Right now, his glare seems to shout, *I can't believe I, a great and powerful Uchiha, is forced to work anywhere near a lying, traitorous piece of garbage like you.* She's not even exaggerating here. He's looking at her the same way she would look at a particularly large bug smashed on the bottom of a pair of brand new sandals.

She sends him a cheery smile, which makes him turn his head away in a full-out tsundere display of holier-than-thou attitude. She really thinks he should focus on mixing the concrete, though. If he put half as much energy into combining the water and dust, he might actually be able to get the large lumps out of the mixture and prevent pockets from forming when it's put down.

As she goes to move back to her place, she gets an eyeful of Hatake's stern countenance, watching the entire encounter. She resists the urge to send him several very rude hand gestures, because even though she really wants to, it would probably be a dead give away that things are not peaceful between the ninja. Plus, while she's fairly certain that while he understands Kiri's secret dirty sign language, he'd actually be more amused by her telling him to go do several very sexual and physically impossible things to himself than affronted, which defeats the whole purpose of the thing.

So she gets back to work and focuses on sending a positive, undisturbed image to everybody working around her, even though nothing could be farther from the truth.

She cannot wait to get back to their lodgings and wash this filth off of her. She is so done with mud, even though she's not slathered in it like the genin. Honestly, what was Hatake teaching them? They were twelve, and when she was twelve-

She grabs a shovel and halts that thought. She shouldn't make comparisons between them, because she was never actually twelve in this universe. It should go without saying that they have a better

childhood as well, instead of the broken mess that would have made up hers, were she an actual child.

It doesn't matter that Kiri taught chakra in the Academy, because it was ruthless drilling and training almost all the time. It's nothing short of a miracle that she and Zabuza know how to write their characters with as much emphasis as Kiri put on the combat arts. There's also a reason she was the one who had to inform the boys about the birds and the bees.

Here's a hint: Unless you were a seduction agent, Kiri didn't teach it.

Seriously though, trying to cram a good education into a mere 4-6 years of study was insane, especially with the focus Academies tended to give on physical education and ninja training. Most of their day was conditioning. Almost all of it, actually. Like, there was no talk of literature, ever. There was no science classes, unless you counted chakra theory, lessons on chemical poisons, basic first aid, and physiology. There was no unbiased history courses, and even those propaganda sessions were limited.

Then again, assassins and mercenary children had no need for such things. That shit was reserved for noble children.

... Which makes her question how Orochimaru knows *so freaking much* . How big of a nerd is he? When he was a kid, was he given lessons, or did he just read everything within reaching distance?

None of that matters, though. At least, not right now. She doesn't think it does? There could be correlations drawn to how poor education affects maturity level and emphasis on the ability to serve the state limits outward expansion and promotes isolationist tendencies, but she doesn't want to think about sociology at the moment. Or is that government?

Fuck it. She's lost her ability to care at the moment.

Idly throwing a heap of mud into her wheelbarrow, she wishes they had a bulldozer to do this sort of thing.

"How many children did you associate with behind our backs?" Haku demands as he paces the length of their room later that evening.

"Not to mention the Copy-nin. Who does he think he is, touching you so casually? The audacity of him, holding the little blond boy back at the end of the day. It was painfully obvious he wanted to embrace you! The *nerve* of that foul Konoha dog."

Zabuza watches idly as the teenager wears down the tatami mats, loudly letting his displeasure be known. Haku combs over the day's events meticulously, venting his stress to his caretakers.

Ryuishi hides her face tiredly in Zabuza's lap, and he drags his hand through her hair calmly. She knows what she did, the mess she's made. She has no need to be reminded of the consequences.

"And asking us to stand and just watch as they glared at you! We are your family, how could you? Do you know how worried we were?" the teenager continues.

Zabuza allows her hand to curl into the fabric of his sleeping pants, feeling her breath catch in her throat, her chest halting in its rhythmic movements.

Idly, he feels pleased that she is guilty. She put the entire squad in danger by withholding secrets. He usually doesn't care, but things like this need to be known. The Copy-nin is dangerous, right down to his bones. He threatens their existence, and he makes Zabuza acutely aware that he cannot guard them one hundred percent of the time. Especially when she sneaks away to do business in places she doesn't allow him to follow.

The Copy-nin could have killed her at any time. Handlers were allowed to such things. They were allowed to make executive decisions about the assets in their possession.

Possessions, he thinks, irritated. She belonged to nobody but who she chose, and she chose the unit. Not the Copy-nin, not the Snake Sannin. The unit.

"We should run them out... no, just the man. Running children out of a city would reflect poorly on us-"

"Haku," she says, but it is muffled by her childhood friend's thigh. He feels the heat of her breath across his skin, and pauses his ministrations. His hand stills on her back, fingers tangled in wet black hair.

"-from what I have seen the Suna boy you associate with has been raised correctly. Surely the blond must have some positive points as well-"

She turns her head, exposing her face to the air of the room. She's still damp from her quick rinse to wash away the sweat and mud of work. "Haku, we are not running them off. It's not even an option at this point. Also, stop talking about the kids I nurtured like that. In a better world you would have all been raised together as siblings," she states calmly, and the Yuki boy whirls on his heel to face her.

"How many *siblings* would I have had?" he spits vehemently. "Just so I won't be surprised if we run into another."

"Watch your tone, Haku," she warns. "You're never gonna be too old to be grounded."

The boy purses his lips, but the thought remains inside Zabuza's head. How many children has she converted with her affections? How many jinchuuriki has she encountered?

The question makes him uneasy. He owns Kubikiribōchō, the Butcher Blade, the ever-healing sword that remakes itself in the blood of his enemies. He is a master of decapitating in one stroke, and killing in utter silence.

A Bijuu has no blood, and he cannot decapitate it. It is raw chakra and primal power. It is a demon, one that makes him look weak in comparison. He does not like the fact that she associates with such beings, that she caters to powers that rightfully should be left alone.

"How many do you know?" he asks, his gravelly voice cutting through the room.

Ryuishi rolls over to face him, and her hair is cool against his thigh. She watches him through thick lashes, and they hold a silent conversation with their eyes.

"I don't know," she answers, but her finger taps out three times against his leg.

Zabuza leans down, his face hovering inches above her own, and he gauges her reaction.

"Which ones?" he says calmly.

"It's complicated," she answers, but her fingers dance again. There is a single tap, a pause, eight taps, a pause, and nine more against his leg.

He grits his teeth, because when she decides to do something, it's never halfway. The Ichibi, Hachibi, and Kyuubi. He guessed as much with the red headed brat in Sunagakure, but to know that blond boy holds the Nine-Tails...

"It's *really* complicated," she emphasizes. "Some I've only interacted with once, and there are whispers that some of my members may have interacted with one without knowing."

Hesitantly, she taps four times. It's unverified data, but there is a chance her influence has spread wide enough to wrangle them in without her being there to watch over it.

"You're doing that doublespeak thing again," Haku complains. "I would greatly appreciate it if you didn't do that. I studied under both of you, and I believe I am the most qualified to understand the seriousness of the situation. I'm not eleven anymore."

"I'm very proud of your academic progress," she assures the boy, but she retains her eye contact with her childhood friend.

The fact that she is being honest speaks of how much this encounter has shaken her. She wasn't expecting it at all, and he is sure she's running circles in her head. She's thinking about it too hard again, attempting to control everything.

"Zabuza," whines Haku from the middle of the room. The tone of it pricks at the masked man, and he flicks his gaze up to examine the boy.

Big, pleading eyes bore into him, and he grits his teeth. He hates that look. That's the look that got him into the mess with the rabbit. It's the look that got them both in trouble when the boy asked to be taught poisons.

"It's done," he says firmly.

"But what is done? Just tell me, I'm fifteen years old-"

"Haku, you know more than any fifteen year old has any right to. I promise you that not knowing this one thing isn't going to hurt you," Ryuishi informs him.

She can hear his put-upon huff, but there are lines to how much she wants him to know. Zabuza needs to know for safety reasons, and he deserves to be told anyway. Haku, however, is a teenager who knows enough to start his own information ring. He knows the traders she uses, the way she structures the caravans, the goods they send to the Kiri rebels, and the way that the Stone Daimyo likes his sexual partners to act.

Honestly, by this point Haku is not only their child, but her heir as well. She just doesn't say it, because she would never want this sort of life for him, even if he is the best suited for it. She wants him to choose his own way, something that makes him happy. He's educated, and he's cared for, and he's their heart when they forget they have one.

He seems to accept that he has gained all he can for now though, because she can hear his footsteps, whisper light and skating just above the ground, heading over. There is a moment where she can feel his presence at her back before he collapses on top of her like a dead-weight, his body going limp as he adds himself to the jumbled pile.

Her hand goes out automatically to clutch him closer to her, and he allows her simply re-assure herself with his existence for a few moments.

"I'm sorry I raised my voice at you, Ryuishi," the boy mumbles. "I know you didn't plan this, and I really wouldn't mind a sibling."

Here he sends the two of them a pointed look that they don't catch, but he didn't expect them to. The three of them lay there for a while, finding solace in the familiar company and tangled positions. They do this until a knock comes from their outside balcony.

"Send him away," Haku whispers. "Better yet, don't answer at all."

Ryuishi sighs and presses her face deep into Haku's hair for a second, which is weird, but she needs just one more moment of peace before this shit show.

The knock comes again, and it is Zabuza who pushes her away, his lips twisted into a frown.

"I know, I know," she gripes. "My mess, I clean it up."

She peels herself away from the group, shivering at the sudden loss of heat, and flops to her feet agilely. She takes a single moment to smooth out her appearance, and gives the other two a moment to settle themselves as they please. She hears the clank of Kubikiribōchō being shifted closer to its wielder, and the delicate tinkle of senbon moving into place.

She takes a moment to crush the bubbling hysteria building in her chest that wants to burst out. She's about to confront Hatake, and Zabuza is wearing fucking pajama pants. Only she and Haku are dressed in their proper clothes. This situation is ridiculous, it's out of hand-

She breathes in, and steels herself. *Seven in, hold four, seven out.*

The moment she slides the balcony door open, curtain and all, she is confronted with Hatake's stern countenance. His lone grey eye darts around the room to take in everything that could possibly be a trap. The underlying feeling in the room shifts, and suddenly there is a wary, watchful tension instead of lethargic, if irritated, peace.

"Watanabe," he greets coldly, and she narrows her eye at the tone. If that's how he wants to play this, then fine.

"Hatake," she returns coolly. "You've already met my team, Momochi Zabuza, wielder of, Kubikiribōchō, and our charge."

He narrows his own eye at the term, and re-examines Haku with a critical eye. He knows as well as she does what she means by the word 'charge'. His gaze, however, slides back to Zabuza. He is most likely the largest threat to his person, and it makes sense that he would keep his focus on the other man. Especially because Zabuza can look threatening without even trying.

"It was a surprise," he drawls.

"Not as much as your appearance here, I assure you," she says calmly. She waves her arm towards the room, gesturing for him to

move. "Get inside before the bugs slip in."

He follows her suggestion, sliding past her. Their shoulders briefly brush, and she shuts the door closed once more.

For a moment, there is stillness as the Konoha-nin finds his place, and Ryuishi can't but feel horrible for what she knows might happen. She never wanted to be this way, she wanted friends, allies, and a big family. She wanted warmth, comfort, and love.

But she's never been good with those things.

"Will your team be present throughout this then?" the Leaf ninja asks drolly.

There it is again, that demeanor, like none of the effects him. Like it isn't worth being affected by, and he's somehow in control. Somewhere inside her, she knows it's a facade, but he's been a real dick, and she's irritated.

"Yes, they will, because that's what allies do. They stick together," she states, her husky voice cutting.

Hatake turns to face her, and she sees a moment of startlement pass over his features before it is covered up.

That's good, she wants him shocked. She wants a reaction, because she is tired of catering to a village and getting nothing back. It's not a moral choice, or a personal decision. It's business, plain and simple.

"Let me clear something up for you, Hatake, because you seem to mistaken. You are not in Konoha right now. You aren't in the Land of Fire, you're in the Land of Rivers. My ground, not yours," she says calmly.

"Watanabe-" he interjects.

The ominous sound of a grip tightening on metal, quiet and purposeful, cuts him off. Zabuza leans forward in his seat, his

expression lazy and threatening all at once.

"Try again, *Copy-nin*," he growls. "I'm not sure I like your tone."

His eye narrows, and she notices his foot slide back defensively, his hands raising to his kunai holsters. In her peripheral vision she catches Haku shifting towards Zabuzza, long needles in between his knuckles.

The two men stare at each other, and she withholds a sigh for a moment. She didn't get like this with Mei, did she?

Man, she wishes she was with Mei. That woman is disproportionately awesome. And beautiful. She would love to be dealing with the Kiri rebels actually, but she's fairly certain that there is a coup taking place on the islands right now. If not at this exact moment, then pretty soon.

She shouldn't worry about that right now, though. She's done all she can, and there is a strong possibility of it working out in her favor. She isn't God, or a deity of any kind. She can't control everything at once, or even think of every possibility. She has to do one thing at a time, and right now, it's handling the Konoha situation.

"Look," she starts. "I know you're here to grill me. Probably about what I haven't told you about, what I was doing inside Konoha, if you were ever my actual handler, that sort of shit. We could even get into the politics of it. You could demand, as your loyalty says you must, that I stop interacting with Naruto, that I give myself up, and that we are now enemies or something equally stupid. Let me just come right out and say that's a bunch of bullshit, and I'm not really feeling like I owe you much."

He turns to her carefully, considering the firm set of her brow and the exasperated expression on her face. She looks tired, and ready to disengage. It's a worrying appearance.

"You really thrashed a lot of my plans by showing up. I was just going to fucking wait and see what happened. Just hope that what I taught Naruto showed through. I was playing the long game, Hatake, and you fucked that up," she tells him honestly.

"What did you teach him?" he asks guardedly.

She looks at him steadily, her gaze piercing. "Do you really think I have it in me to make some sort of sleeper agent, Hatake? Or that I am trying to subvert the loyalty of your Jinchuuriki? That I'm attempting to take Konoha down through some elaborate plan, and cackle maniacally from the shadows as the world burns?"

"I think that sometimes the consequences of your actions surprise you," he says coolly.

A muffled laugh emerges from Haku, and Zabuza closes his eyes in exasperation. The teenager even looks disappointed with himself at the moment, his face flushed and his eyes down-turned.

"Sorry," he says quietly, turning the focus onto himself for a moment. "That was just... very accurate."

Hatake turns to her with a raised brow, his hand gesturing outward as if to say, *See, even he thinks so*.

"Young man," Ryuishi sighs, looking towards the heavens. Or the ceiling. "Tomorrow, you are going to help me in the mud."

"But," he protests, startled. "But I'm helping the other provide for the workers-"

"Sakura would love that job, I'm sure. Perhaps even Naruto," Kakashi volunteers.

It's a rare moment of solidarity between adults. Maybe Hatake is just trying to get the kids away from her, but somewhere he can still monitor. That's fine.

... Okay, not really, but it works, if Haku's pouting expression is anything to go by.

Perhaps in the future he won't call dangerous attention to himself in the middle of negotiations. Then again, he was raised by her and Zabuza, so she's unsure if this isn't the lesser evil of whatever else he could be doing.

She shifts her attention away from the subject, and turns it back to Hatake.

"See that?" Ryuishi states. "That was working together."

"Konoha has been working together with you," Hatake attempts to defend, but she shakes her head even as Zabuza snorts in the background.

"No, Konoha has been sitting back while I serve it. It's been a pretty one way street Hatake. I give you great information, attempt to befriend you, bow out of any field confrontations, and attempt to clean up the messes you make. Like today with your public image. I could have let you look like an ass, but I didn't," she drawls.

"However, the exact moment you see something you don't like, you bend me over and try to fuck me, and I'm tired of it."

She pauses for a moment, reconsidering her usage of words.

" *Metaphorically* bend me over and fuck me. You don't actually attempt coitus, you just get really commanding and bossy, hinting at threats and stuff. You also don't stay out of my business, because Leaf-nin keep showing up all over the damn place."

Hatake looks at her blankly, and she knows for a fact that Zabuza is giving her the same exact face. She doesn't even know why she tries to be professional anymore, it never works out well. For some reason she can only manage it with a select few people, and none of them are in this room at the moment.

"Somebody translate that into something that sounds less awful," she says to the room at large.

"There has been a disproportionate flow of goods and services between Konoha and Ryuishi-sama. The village also continually interferes with her business while ignoring attempts at treaty or trade negotiations while maintaining overbearing expectations of her behavior, neglecting responsibility for its own actions," Haku says dutifully. It's a masterful display of wording, and it grants him some forgiveness on her part. She knew those diplomacy lessons would be useful.

Ryuishi raises her hand to point at Haku.

"That, Hatake. That's what I meant," she says.

The shinobi in question seems to be thinking things over at a rapid pace, his eyes darting between the three of them.

"You threatened war. That's fucking over the line, and also the last straw. I love Naruto, but as I said before, he swore his oaths. He's a loyal Konoha shinobi now, and he has to start making his own decisions sometime. You are, and remain, a truly good man, and a good friend, but I can't take this abuse. I'm stretched thin, and I need somebody who is going to work with me, not watch me like I'm a rabid animal going to attack at anytime. There are threats I have to deal with, and I can't put my focus on Konoha if it's going to keep screwing me."

He looks pained, and she knows she's putting him in a bad place. She wouldn't if she didn't have to, but she does. She's managing far too much on her own, and she can't gamble on something that has no payout. She loves spending time with Hatake and Wood Boy. It's fun, and comforting. If it was a personal choice, she would continue sneaking around like a teenager to go see them.

Only, it's not a personal choice. Ryuishi is in charge of so much, and she needs to make decisions that not only satisfy her, but have good

outcomes for her people as well. She can't put her unit in danger just because she likes hanging out with her friends. She also cannot allow a one-sided negotiation to continue, because her people need something out of it as well. Otherwise, it's a waste of resources.

"Watanabe, you're a missing-nin. In the eyes of the nations, being seen working with you would be devastating to our reputation. Not only that, but you're toeing the line as the Rakki Ryu as well. The shinobi system has existed since for generations, and nobody wants that challenged. I need time to look into the things you informed me of," Hatake states, and she feels her heart clench painfully. Her resolve wavers, because he is her friend, and she is compromised.

"Then take your time, and come to us," Zabuza states lowly. "She won't come to you. She isn't a citizen of the Land of Fire, or a kunoichi of Konoha. She doesn't belong to you, and she doesn't owe you. You're holding her back."

Kakashi looks at her, and she holds her breath. Zabuza's right, she can't keep going on. She isn't a dog, or a tool, or a weapon to order about.

"You have had time, Hatake. I've been an asset for you for eight years or so. Enough is enough," she tells him gently, begging for him to understand.

He looks around the room slowly, as if coming to a realization. She sees the moment he understands what she is trying to say, when his lone grey eye empties out, and he switches into that default professional mode.

"Will you work against the Land of Fire?" he asks lowly, and she grits her teeth. He is being the king of assholes right now.

"I am ending my visits and the flow of information the The Land of Fire until I deem there is appropriate action taken in reciprocation," she says. "This will come into effect after the end of the current joint effort here."

"That doesn't answer my question," he states.

"Do you stand by and let an opponent break your legs, Hatake? Or do you stop them?" she says simply.

He stands straight again, and his eye wanders over her frame. She doesn't know why he's looking over her like that, or why he flicks his eye judgmentally over to her team.

"A truce until the end of the mission," he agrees. "Then an end of association."

It's so final, so monotone. She wonders if they were ever friends at all, or if she was just duped like the sucker she is. She had thought that maybe, after all these years, there might have been some genuine affection. Maybe a little desire to stick together.

"I didn't want this," she whispers. She feels sick, and used. Why is he so okay with it?

He waits in front of her and she wants to hate how calm he is. She wants to dislike him down to his bones, but all she can see is the dork with shuriken pattern sheets. She doesn't see a professional assassin, or the legendary killer. She sees the guy who likes broiled saury and eggplant miso, who pats her head before they go to sleep at night. The man who took her in when she had no one. Her friend.

She looks at the ground, caught between punching herself for being an idiot, punching him for being a cold ass, or maybe crying a bit because of both.

"I think you should leave now," intones Haku. "If all parties understand the terms of the agreement, there is no reason for you to remain in our abode."

Hatake nods stiffly, and he walks right past her. Again their shoulders brush, and time seems to dilate, and their hands brush against each other for a moment.

Ryuishi doesn't catch the split second hesitation in his step when he feels cool skin, or the way he flicks his eye back at her lowered head, but Zabuza does.

She got him too, the swordsman thinks apathetically. He watches the Copy-nin leave, and his watchful gaze seems to lessen in intensity. He's loyal to his village, but then again, so was Zabuza.

Loyalty to a village does not negate loyalty to a person. If his female teammate is good at anything, it's blurring the lines between things.

AN: Spoiler alert, I'm updating on Monday's now. I know a lot of you thought the last chapter was the end of it, but there are long term political ramifications of her actions, and Kakashi isn't a hundred percent sure she's not being tricky and manipulating them all. That being said, the relationship between the two of them has actually been pretty emotionally abusive until now. Last chapter Kakashi full out admitted he was using her emotions and affection against her while selling her out, and up till now, Konoha has been the only one befitting. Ryuishi kept hoping if she was useful, if she acted right, if she was just good enough, that maybe she would actually get a friend. Next chapter deals with the other side of the story as well. Meanwhile, Zabuza continues to wonder exactly how much shit Ryuishi is hiding, and how many cluster fucks she has caused, and Haku worries about the danger she puts herself in and calls her out, then gets mad at Kakashi for making his mom cry. The difference is that they support her, and also would still hang with her if she lost all her titles and clout. We also see that Zabuza thinks Kakashi is a chump for not seeing the obvious.

A shout out to my lurkers, favoriters, and followers. A standing ovation with confetti and party poppers for my reviewers, who keep me strong and are better than I deserve.

MAY GOOD THINGS SHINE DOWN ON MY BETA ENBI. Always remember that any good grammar, spelling, and corrections

belong to her, and also that she helps me form ideas for the story as well.

Question: What was team seven doing in their (sealed, locked, barricaded with an alarm set) hotel room while Kakashi was away? OR What if Zabuza and Kisame had started their own cool duo and went renegade together, instead of parting ways?

In Which Trouble Begins

I do not own Naruto.

Hatake Kakashi is a professional jōnin of Konohagakure, the Village Hidden in the Leaves, stronghold of the Land of Fire. He is, and always will be, loyal to the village he was raised in. The village that he fought for, home of the people he cares for, and the loved ones he has lost.

He exceeds expectations in most, if not all areas. He follows his orders, because orders are just, and he has faith in his Hokage. He respects the shinobi rules, because while on duty, they are helpful guidelines and they have their place. He trains with his comrades, and he recognizes their value as people and ninja.

Therefore, there should be no sting when Watanabe does not show up at the worksite, and is substituted with the taciturn swordsman that has been her partner.

Zabuza shows up and gets to work without word, seamlessly picking up where she left off. The man does not attempt to interact with Kakashi's genin, nor does he show any signs that he is avoiding them. At one point, he takes over mixing concrete without a word, showing Sasuke how it is supposed to be done silently. The boy looks angry enough to spit fire (entirely possible, considering his clan), but Zabuza just continues on doing his job. Another time, Naruto mumbles the phrase 'no-eyebrows freak, stealing Fairy-nee' within earshot. It garners nothing more than an amused huff and a passing glance. Sakura sends disconcerting glances between the man and Kakashi every half hour, but both ignore it. They are professionals.

Kakashi finds himself quietly falling into a pattern as the days pass. He remains alert and directs levee builders while supervising his

team. The other man supervises the construction of the spillway while keeping his focus on the Konoha-nin and his own unit's locations. Kakashi does not make comparisons between the two of them, wondering why he is accepted by her side.

(And didn't Zabuza abandon her? When did he come back? Is he poisoning her against Kakashi, using their shared past and her weakness with emotional attachments? Where did the young boy come from? Is that how the man got to her, using a child? The Demon of the Mist looks fearsome... Is he stronger than Kakashi? More able? What does he offer her, and why does she accept it?)

Kakashi does not feel like he has lost anything. He does not wonder how far he can stretch the meals in his freezer, or how long the scent of saltwater and pear blossoms will subtly linger on the items she has left in his house. He does not think about the face Tenzo will make when informed, or how he will no longer wonder if he will come home to find her in his apartment.

(*He was a blazing ball of heat*, she once said about the man. But where was he when she was freezing to death in Shimo? Where was he when she came to Konoha, battered and bruised? Where was he when she screamed silently in terror, caught in a flashback while she slept?)

Kakashi is a professional. It never mattered anyway. She was, and will always remain, a missing-nin and an asset to his village. It's not like he enjoyed the activities they did, or the time spent together. He in no way feels any positive, deep-seated emotions toward her person. Thoughts of her antics don't make him occasionally smile, or quietly laugh, and he does not regret the way things have turned out.

(It wasn't the demon, it was *Kakashi* who was there for her-)

He *doesn't* .

He observes the looks that his sensei's son sends him, hurt and begging, and he notes that this is an example of her unscrupulous

ways. He certainly doesn't feel anything when Naruto begins to tell him about the things she taught him, the ways the missing-nin helped him as a child. It's just evidence of her devious schemes, her grasping hands reaching out and trying to snatch power away from Konoha.

"-showed me how to hold them by their backs, so their little pincers didn't get my fingers. Crayfish are weird, and they flip their tails out like *fwap-fwap-fwap*, which is how they move underwater. She said if I was ever lost or hungry, almost every river has them under rocks and stuff. All you gotta do is set a trap, or catch them by hand, then boil some water. I mean, they taste weird, but she always has a way of making them taste really fucking good-" the genin continues by his side, smoothing out concrete.

Scheming, Kakashi reminds himself. She was scheming, gaining his affection so she could use him. He holds no thoughts of her half-asleep form hunched over his table, nursing a cup of tea, breakfast ready on two separate plates. He doesn't remember the way she made eggs, with the yolk just the right amount of runny, and how she once tried to show him how to cook.

Why would he?

"-sings when she cleans up. I mean, she always chews my ass out first though, because I guess I should clean up more often or whatever. Sometimes it wasn't even words. She showed me how to fold a shirt super small, in a roll, so it would fit better inside drawers. Maybe she could show you, if you go over and ask. You and me, we can go find her *right now* -" he continues the next day when she doesn't show up.

That was simply ensuring the comfort of an asset, the same as he did for her. Admittedly beyond what some would do, but making sure Naruto knew how to fend for himself and maintained a good abode ensured that he could survive when she wasn't there. That he could cope without her. An independent operative with the ability to think

for themselves served in more complex situations than an order driven shinobi.

The singing was nothing. Watanabe sang anytime there was too much stillness, or quiet. She filled up the rooms with her husky crooning, soft words spoken in poetic ways, or an intelligible language flowing out. It was just sound for the sake of sound. It wasn't pleasant or melodious. It was a psychological tic, theoretically having to do with long periods of isolation or decreased hearing, where she only heard what noise she made. She made noise because she could not stand the silence. That was the most popular theory between him and the Hokage, anyway.

(The same Hokage that assured him Naruto was taken care of, when he was actually being raised by a *missing-nin* . He had questions, and he needed answers-)

"-looked sad sometimes, so I asked why. I don't like it when she's sad. She said she lost things, and she was trying to make a new friend-was that you?-but it was hard. I told her ninja could help, and she said that being a ninja was neither good nor bad, because ninja were people, but it meant sometimes watching your friends die... S- She's a ninja, so, I mean, d-did she have to watch that? She said whole squads, and I didn't know... Oh. *Oh* . she meant that. She had to-"

The boy goes quiet around mid week, his face flickering before falling completely. He looks as if he has learned something awful, and in a way, Kakashi supposes he has.

It's not surprising. She was a combatant in the Third Shinobi War. There would be casualties. It's a new piece of information to put forward, and it doesn't change anything. After all, she had already confided into heavy losses before they met.

She informed him of the Academy Graduation Massacre on their excursion to Training Ground Forty-Four, with bitterness and anger seeping out of her.

("He was just a kid, and so was I, and Kiri? Kiri **wanted** us to kill each other.")

And when she came home from the battles, he remembers that there was only more tragedy to greet her.

(" Mom was a whore. Found her crushed under some rubble when I came back from leave. ")

Even when they first met, after he was cornered by hunter-nin and she distracted them, he was aware of her losses. She was ill and tired, grieving and out of her mind with a burning fever.

(" They were supposed to use what I gave them to find me! We were gonna be a unit again. I **need** them- ")

So really, that she witnessed the loss of a squad is nothing alarming to Kakashi. He is a professional. The information is just data to him, and evokes no personal response.

(Finding his father in a pool of blood, Obito crushed under stone, Rin with his hand through her heart, whispering his name. His sensei gone forever.)

Hatake Kakashi is a professional jōnin of Konohagakure, the Village Hidden in the Leaves, stronghold of The Land of Fire.

(And now... no more songs in that strange language, no hands tangled in his hair, no foul curses that make no sense, no more smells of food wafting through his home. No breaks in the monotony, no demands to make him feel, to push him back into interacting like a human. No strange comments and even stranger compliments. No surprise visits with gifts from lands far away, bought with him in mind. No more walks through the village. No more long showers, and half-hummed tunes while staring out into the night sky.)

He is, and always will be, loyal to the village he was raised in. The village that he fought for, home of the people he cares for, and the

home of the loved ones he has lost.

(No cold hands, no snaggle-toothed smiles.)

He exceeds expectations in most, if not all areas. He follows his orders, because orders are just, and he has faith in his Hokage. He respects the shinobi rules, because while on duty, they are helpful guidelines and they have their place. He trains with his comrades, and he recognizes their value as people and ninja.

("I mean it, Hatake, you're a good man," she tells him. She says this even though she knows his past, even though she knows what he does in ANBU, what he did before... She still believes those words.)

He does not return to the inn at night, looking for a familiar face in the crowd. He does not scan the rooftops at scheduled intervals, catching the leaping figure of a missing-nin on patrol. He does not waver when Naruto insists on looking for the only mother figure has ever known.

("I didn't want this," she whispers.)

If anything, he is worried about the ramifications of the Rakki Ryuu breaking ties with Konoha. She's open now for any other country to befriend, one that might assist with the bounty hunters that stalk her team's steps, or offer to trade with her. Her new handler could come from Kumo, Iwa, or even Suna. But until they can compete, Konoha is out of the running. *He* is out of the running. Not that it matters to him personally.

(She was wrong. He isn't a good man.)

He focuses on what he is supposed to be doing. Teaching genin. Watching the team, building a levee, and representing the Land of Fire.

At night, he begins to teach his team how to channel chakra to their feet in order to stand on the mud better. Even Naruto is distracted

when Kakashi had shows how this skill can be utilized by walking up the walls of their conjoined rooms to the ceiling. Immediately the boy wants to mimic it, but Kakashi (righteously) forbids them from practicing on any standing structures.

After the children work enough for the day, he takes them into the jungle and lets them attempt to crawl up into the trees. He sits and supervises. He does not wonder if she and the swordsman ever did this with their charge, and if they worked together to train him. He doesn't think about the way the androgynous male has copied her bun, or the way she places her hand on his hip. He simply instructs, methodically describing the theory behind the action.

Only Sakura gets it down at first. The young girl is seen sliding around the mire with her wheelbarrows and tools. She's good with theory, and has brilliant control. Naruto and Sasuke take far more time to master the same skill she used with ease.

Kakashi does not deign to notice the amused, condescending huff that the Mist-nin lets out at the sight of the boys' failures. He knows the man presumes it is weakness, but also isn't going to take advantage of it.

The obvious training also allows the civilians to connect with the Konoha ninja better as well, because their mistakes make them more human. A young boy falling in slick earth is more approachable than an angry-eyed youth with knives. It makes up for the fact that there was a poor first impression.

He sticks to routine: get up in the morning, check on his students, prepare for the day, head out to the construction site, interact amicably with civilians and watch his students. He breaks for lunch, returns, continues, is seen behaving tolerantly near the Mist-nin, shepherds the genin to a quick training session, then goes back to the hotel, secures the parameter, remains on watch as long as possible, and then falls into an uneasy sleep.

Rinse, repeat.

It keeps the ties neutral between Konoha and the Rakki Ryuu. It disappoints Naruto, but satisfies the other two. Construction advances until there is less mud, and only a few days of finishing touches need to be done.

No need to look harder, to examine the tension or underlying emotions. He is a professional, all is well.

And then it isn't.

Kakashi and his team are walking after their early supper to the patch of jungle they've been using to train, where nature and city seem to meld. The streets are sparsely filled, but that is no surprise.

What is a surprise, though, is the duo waiting for them, wearing black cloaks patterned with red clouds. He knows one of them at least, an S-rank missing-nin with white hair and violet eyes, grinning like a maniac. He remembers the file he received, her handwritten notes in the margin, and her words.

There are threats that make me look amateur in comparison, she had said, and just seeing these two, he knows she wasn't lying. They exude the kind of aura that makes the hairs on the back of his neck prickle, and they smell like death and old blood.

Kakashi flares his chakra out in a set pattern while shoving his genin team behind him, knowing that at least one other person in this city knows the Konoha distress signal. He suddenly hopes beyond reason that Watanabe wasn't lying when she said she loved Naruto, and that her actions raising him were more than some ploy. He prays, because she wasn't lying, and oh, he has treated her so badly. He only recognizes it now, when the truth is yards away, ready to knife him in the gut, and he regrets.

He knows he doesn't deserve it. He knows he was wrong, but he hopes that she at least deigns to remember his team. They are fresh and green, and they deserve better than him. *Everyone* deserves better than him.

He knows that Watanabe's mother was a whore, and that they weren't that attached. She always seemed uninterested in who could have been her father. But maybe she should have been a little bit more curious, because the cold, dead gaze of the man with the mask and hood is an exact copy of hers.

Ryuishi is in the middle of socializing with some of the workers when she notices both Zabuza and Haku turn their heads in tandem to face northwest.

The talk around her becomes white noise when she notices the tightening of the skin around Haku's eyes. He's suddenly tense at the table, and in the shaded lighting of the eating establishment, she can see his focus extend outward. Likewise, Zabuza gains that laser-like focus that means he's anticipating a hunt. His features lose their loose, lethargic cast, and he stiffens up.

All she can smell is the various roasted meats and vegetables, but she's always been a shitty sensor. She relies on her team when her hearing and smell do not cut it, and right now it seems like the two of them are narrowing in on a signal.

"Hang on, guys," she interrupts, startling some of the laborers. "I gotta go check on something."

She flashes them a reassuring smile, and excuses herself from the group. Her footsteps are steady and controlled as she weaves her way around the packed room, twisting around tables and seated patrons. The dull roar of the chatter around her buzzes in her head, and her eyes dart around as she comes to step behind Zabuza.

His hand is clasped tight on his chopsticks, frozen on his plate. Not a good sign. Zabuza's a fucking pig, and he doesn't stop eating without good reason.

Haku's fingers drumming on the table at a rapid speed are not reassuring either.

Ryuishi makes sure to keep her features controlled as she comes to their booth. She reaches out to place her hand on Zabuza's shoulder gently, and when he turns to face her, he seems resigned.

"What is it?"

"Chakra flares," he grunts. "Big ones."

"The Konoha jōnin. It feels prickly, like static," Haku confirms. "On the other side of the river, near the trees."

Her breath catches in her throat, because Hatake is a master of stealth. He doesn't just send out chakra flares. And as much as she's pissed off at him, he still has a trio of twelve year olds with him that she would hate to see hurt.

"Was there a pattern?" she asks.

"One, three, one" Haku tells her, dropping his utensils and wiping his hands off on a napkin. He turns to her, his eyes serious, and she turns to Zabuza.

"That's Leaf Standard. A call for help," she whispers, and her fixed smile becomes strained. She knows that they are supposed to be done, that everything is supposed to be over, but this is an exception. That close means that they are still in the city, and shinobi distress inside city limits is a dangerous thing. There's a chance of collateral damages, and civilian casualties.

Not only that, but this is her turf. She is obligated to check it out.

"Wedge formation. I'm on point," Zabuza tells her, sliding out of the booth. He grabs Kubikiribōcho and secures it on his back, stalking to the front door. She's glad that he accepts it so simply. She can't imagine what it would be like to fight Zabuza on this. Fucking hell, she's never not going to be appreciative of the taciturn bastard.

Their actions have garnered some attention, and various workers and families turn to her as Haku and Zabuza make their way outside.

"Alright everybody, you guys chill out. Something just came up and we're off to check it out," Ryuishi forces out cheerily, smile firmly plastered on her face. "Stay inside, alright?"

"Why would we go anywhere else? Food and beer is in here!" somebody cries out from the back. The statement is followed by raucous laughter, and she mimics the sound hollowly, waving a hand behind her as she slips out after her team.

She slides the half curtain aside and falls into formation, the grin melting off her face. The light of day is almost gone, casting an oddly solemn atmosphere to the jungle city's streets.

Zabuza cracks his neck once, and then sets the pace, Ryuishi and Haku trailing behind him on either side. The speed of their movements causes their clothes to snap back against their forms, their hair suddenly swept back against their skulls.

"Combat capabilities of the Konoha team," Zabuza commands as they hit the roof tops. There is something comforting and familiar about falling back onto well-drilled instinct like this. It's the common interaction of a commanding officer leading their subordinate on the field, and it is soothing to her suddenly agitated state of mind.

"Genin are tricky, but Hatake's one hell of a ninjutsu specialist. The man's just as good as they say, Zabuza, and he wouldn't signal unless he meant it. Hell, he probably wouldn't signal unless his team was in danger."

Which is more than worrying, because Naruto is on that team. Her precious Naruto. The boy she raised, with sky blue eyes and sunshine smiles. The boy she was restraining herself from embracing this entire time. The thought of him in danger sends her heartbeat skyrocketing. He's just a boy, and nothing bad is supposed to happen now. She's ruined the Wave mission, torn it to pieces.

Nothing is the same. But he still isn't supposed to be anywhere near danger.

"Priorities?" Zabuza asks as they tense for a leap. Three pairs of feet funnel chakra to their toes and push off, exploding into mountainous heights, soaring above the world for a second. In the approaching gloom, they are slim shadows against the darkness.

"The genin," she answers honestly. "Hatake can fend for himself, he's made that much obvious. If it looks like he can handle it, we observe from a distance."

She's not bitter. Who's bitter? *Not* her, that's who.

"Hand signals from here on out then," he orders, and unseen, the two behind him nod. It makes sense anyway, if they want to just stealthily sneak around. He raises his hand in clear view, an open palm, and he shakes it left and right just once.

She and Haku seamlessly switch to a column formation instead of a wedge. This way everybody will be able to see signals better.

They cross the river, and Haku furrows his brows again, his eyes squinting hard like he can sense something. He's the most sensitive out of all of them to chakra, which isn't saying much. Zabuza and her weren't part of a retrieval team, or a tracking team, so any sort of awareness is more than they learned. Except for Zabuza, she supposes, because he was a hunter-nin.

The teenager touches his forehead and holds up two fingers, then he touches his temple and holds up four fingers. She and Zabuza signal their affirmative as they approach from above. Two unknown signatures, four known, which means that the Konoha team had company.

The tension she feels increases the closer they get, and she hears the sound of metal on metal, and a frantic, distant shouting. For a moment her world seems to tunnel in on itself, because she knows

that voice. That is Naruto, her baby boy, and he is shouting out in panic.

Zabuza signals for their covert approach, and the three muffle their signatures to almost nothing as they come into sight. A scent catches her nose, ozone and dog mixing with ramen broth and old, dried blood. They're the only scents she can name off the bat, and only two of those she can place.

She almost ruins everything when she catches sight of those signature cloaks, crimson clouds against stark black. She sees a scythe with multiple blades pinned up against a puny little kunai of all things, and she feels a little hysterical. It takes a lot of willpower not to scream in frustration.

Sasuke lies on his back behind the team, most likely thrown away by the force of the blow he took, and Sakura and Naruto flank their sensei weakly. Out of the corner of her eye, she catches a flash of dark skin and piercing green eyes. She feels real, solid fear in her gut, fear like she hasn't known since the war. Nobody is ready for this. Not a single one of them.

The Akatsuki, she thinks manically. The ones who can destroy everything she loves. Isn't it funny then, that there is so much she loves here to destroy? Zabuza, Haku, Naruto, and even Kakashi. Small children she has yet to formally meet. All sacrifices she is not prepared to make.

Why are they here? *Why are they here?* There is nothing of value, and she knows for a damn fact that they shouldn't know Naruto is a jinchuuriki. She smothered those rumors personally. The only bounties here to collect would be circumstantial, unless someone was sold out.

Fuck, fuck, she doesn't know. Her own bounty is sizable as hell, as well as Kakashi's and Zabuza's. Together it's enough to be ridiculous, but if they themselves didn't know they would meet, how would anybody else?

She thinks of the rumors, that Ame rogues were on the move. There's no way anybody mistakes these fucks as Ame rogues. Is there an actual group of defectors, or is that info false? Nobody knew about Team Seven save for Konoha and whoever hired them, and the information she sent to her groups was just that she was going to help out with the construction. Her new team was to be a surprise. What was their goal? Why engage Kakashi's team? Why any of this?

There isn't time for these convoluted thoughts, though. Hatake is holding back a psychopathic immortal with a glorified trowel. One kid is already down, and the other two are scared shitless.

Her hand whips out and snatches Zabuza's forearm, and she signals frantically. Her fingers fly, faster than ever before. *Two unknowns classified S-rank. Secure team and disengage.*

Zabuza squints at that last word, but she digs her nails into his skin so he can feel her trembling hand. Their only option is to snatch and grab. If anyone wants to survive they have to run and re-group. Actually, just run. There is no way to take on the pair right now, not while protecting so many young ones.

Disengage, she flashes again forcefully, her eyes darting meaningfully to Haku.

His gaze turns flinty and he nods once, and then Haku is shoved between them, with wide eyes and a startled expression. Zabuza points towards his eyes, and she nods her head as he counts down with his fingers. She breathes deep, racing through hand signs. Her lungs expand as she discreetly molds chakra, and the humid air comes alive, the moisture ready for her to call.

Haku recognizes the seals as Zabuza points towards their targets. The teenager nods as his is chosen for him, and he accepts the task without complaint, for once. Even he can probably sense how serious this is.

The hand counting down lands on zero.

Ryuishi exhales, and a cloud of mist streams from her lips, obscuring everyone's sight. Thick fog rolls over the world in layered banks, heavy and terrible.

"What the absolute fuck!" a familiar voice protests, and she curses her luck as her team dives into the cloud.

They move as a unit, a well-oiled machine. Haku goes to snatch up Sakura, who yelps in protest before she catches the shadow of Ryuishi, who snatches up Naruto in her arms like he is four years old again.

"Nee-san?" he asks.

"Hey, Sunshine," she soothes. It's good to have him in her arms again after so long, but under the circumstances, it's still terrifying. He's grown so much since she last saw him, and she would love to take the time to sit down and talk. But unfortunately, that's not going to happen.

"But sensei-" he tries.

A retching sound comes from beside her, and she starts to sprint. If Hatake has enough energy to hurl when he looks at her with his dumb-ass Sharingan eye, he has enough energy to haul ass.

"-needs to not look at me with his stupid fucking eye and start running," she cuts the boy off, slapping her hand over Naruto's mouth to prevent further argument.

She sees a hunched silhouette in the fog put a hand over an eye as it sprints, and she resists a horrible laugh. That dumb fucker.

There is a meaty thud, the intimately familiar sound of Kubikiribōchō cutting deep into an opponent, and a string of horrible curses. Zabuza flits past her, and the sharp tang of fresh blood coating his blade is promising, but she knows it won't last for long. If anything, Zabuza's startled glance at her speaks volumes more.

I cut off his head and he kept talking, it shouts. That's never happened before.

Yeah, the Zombie Combo wasn't what she signed up for either.

Zabuza doesn't even halt his sprint as he picks up the Uchiha boy. He just sort of leans over and scoops him up in one arm and keeps going. He takes point, and her and Hatake instinctively cover his blind spots, shielding Haku in the center. Kakashi takes everything in stride and follows their example of *running the fuck away* .

Their footsteps are silent, and they move swiftly, but she hears loud, maddened laughter fill the air. It's deranged cackle that sets her teeth on edge and makes her want to tear things apart.

"Oh doll, is that you out there in this pansy ass cloud?" Hidan's voice rings out, and she wishes she had torn him to pieces when they were drunk. "I can feel that chakra you're trying to smother out. It's a blessing, and I'm gonna show you that."

Naruto looks at her with worried blue eyes, and she knows the expression on her face must be a thing of beauty, but she doesn't care, because she is going to tear Hidan apart and peel the flesh from his bones like she should have in the first place. Fucking crazy-ass zealot and his crazy-ass sensing. Stupid fucking Akatsuki, scaring the shit out of her.

"Kakuzu! Put my head back on and clear the air, it's about to be a fucking family reunion!" he cries, and Ryuishi has no idea what the absolute fuck that is supposed to mean, but Naruto's fingers cling tighter to her. Zabuza signals then to head in another direction. He's trying to get to an abandoned stretch of river, she knows this, but there's a good chance they might not make it.

"Naruto, listen to me," she whispers desperately. "You know that I love you and you know that you mean the world to me. I'm sorry I kept secrets from you, and I will explain, just listen to me. Stay out of this fight, do you hear me?"

She feels his sharp intake of breath, and he frantically shakes his head no. In front of her Haku holds up his arm, signaling pursuit. She presses a kiss to the blond's forehead, savoring the scent of salty broth and paint as she sprints, shifting Naruto's substantial weight to one arm to tug at her weapon.

"I don't give a shit what Hatake told you. You take your team, and Haku, and you all run, okay?"

He shakes his head no again, and fear and panic bloom inside her soul once more. She hasn't felt this afraid since she was four years old and that man dragged her off the streets of the Akasen. Her hand is shaking as it pulls lengths of chain free, and she can't stop the rabbit-like beating of her heart. Her legs eat up ground, but she knows she can only keep up this pace for so long. Kakashi and Zabuza are faster than her. She keeps drawing short and shaky breaths, caught somewhere between terror and rage. In the mist, she is sure no one can see her dilated pupils and trembling shoulders, but it doesn't change the fact that she knows they are there.

Ryuishi feels the hairs on her neck rise the very moment she hears rushing water, and the arm clutching to Naruto suddenly tears him away from her body. With a terrible amount of force she pries him free of her.

"KAKASHI!" she howls, hurling the boy away from her. The last sight she has before she turns is of his hands outstretching for her surrogate son.

Then there is no time to think, because she's mid-leap, stretching thick metal links between her hands to block a heavy, triple-bladed scythe. Her control on her chakra loosens, and it bursts out of her, empty and dead.

She hears a long, vaguely obscene moan from above, and then his stupid violet eyes are cutting through the mist, a manic grin stretching across his face.

"Found you," he sing-songs, and then he's cackling like a madman.

She kicks out with her foot as hard as she can just before they impact. The drop knocks the breath out of her lungs, and she slides on her back through the street, but she feels her shot connect. The meaty weight of his ribs crack against her shin and he is sent tumbling away, weapon and all. The laughter stops as he meets the ground, morphing into pained groans of ecstasy. Ryuishi moves instinctively through her shock, rolling over onto all fours and scrambling back up.

"Doll," she hears him shout at her. "You were holdin' back on me."

She doesn't answer, rocketing backwards as fast as she can through the street, her eye pinned on his body until the mist swallows her up. He picks himself off the wooden planks and mud, and he's all bared teeth and wild eyes when he leaps up after her.

"I told you, it's a blessing!" he goads her. "There's purity in a fight, you fucking said it yourself! Why are you holding back now? Is it those shitstains? I'll wipe them out, and then nothing can hold you down!"

Ryuishi knows fear. She knows she is no match for Hidan, or any one of the Akatsuki members as she is now. She knows many, many things. But the moment the threat leaves his mouth, she feels **rage**, so hot and pure it courses through her veins like the incoming tide, and the monster in her head rises up in the waters of her mind. Her lips pull back, and she bares her teeth at him. The Void sings through her, and somewhere she hears a distant voice crying out for their sister.

"Maybe you won't fucking die," she snarls, "But I'm gonna tear you to pieces anyways."

He laughs, high and insane, and she knows she wants to rip his flesh out with her teeth. Knows what she knew in the Third Shinobi

War, when fire bloomed around her and the seas rose at the hands of three monsters.

Protect mine, destroy the others.

She howls, and somewhere, for the first time in years, a cry answers her own.

The Jashinist closes the distance between them, and he bears down on her like an avalanche. She swipes at his feet with her leg, but he jumps, kicking outward the same moment she drops low. Above her, Kubikiribōchō cuts where her head was only seconds before, and it knocks his feet away, sending him spinning. Ryuishi distantly feels a familiar hand grab at her crop top and haul her back, snarling and spitting. A low growl emerges from the perpetrator, and then Zabuza is hauling her along with him, faster than she could go alone.

It takes him mere moments to run to the river's surface and toss her in, and for a second the current overwhelms her. Her mouth fills with muddy water, and her vision goes dark. She twists and turns with the movement of water, angry and disoriented.

Her instincts win over, and she relaxes her taut muscles, letting a bubble slip between her lips. The orb floats across her face, and she turns to watch it, knowing that way is up. Her ears pop, and she hears the vibrations of footsteps.

She undulates, following the footsteps slapping on the water's surface from above. They approach a large, dark shadow hovering on the surface of the water. Somewhere past her instinct and rage, she is appreciative.

Hatake has always been clever. The genin might not be able to channel chakra properly, but with two Mist-nin and a Konoha jōnin, the best place for them is the water. It's a platform to keep the children from interfering, and the strongest terrain they have to work with. Not only that, but that Jashinist fuck can't draw his stupid symbols on liquid that is constantly moving.

This all translates to her snapping her teeth together in appreciation, listening for followers while she shadows Zabuzza. Another pair of feet join the water from the barge, and she goes to surface enough to hear and see, her head emerging from the water.

"Where is she?" Hatake demands, his sharingan eye covered, and Zabuzza must gesture, because then a lone grey eye is picking her out from the fog.

"Is he safe?" she rasps, and it's hard to form words like this, so ready to tear things apart.

She receives a nod.

"The scythe wielder is useless without his head, but other than that can remain fighting. He doesn't die," she hisses.

"He has a partner, tall, strong build, uses black tentacles. He looks a lot like you," Hatake states. "... If you were a six foot man with acid green eyes and blood colored whites," he amends.

"Irrelevant," Zabuzza growls.

Something strange moves in the water. She can feel it, buzzing and slick, and her lips twitch in agitation.

"Aim for the head, or destroy limbs entirely. Divide and conquer," she snaps.

Zabuzza simply nods, but Hatake appears less enthusiastic about the prospect. He wants to remark about how it might be simpler for the Kiri-nin to do, being as they are known for such maneuvers. But never let it be said that he can't adapt.

"Incoming, two hundred yards!" Haku's voice cries out from the barge, and Ryuishi slips her set of Gills out of her pocket into her mouth.

Kill or be killed, just like old times.

She never notices the terrified pair of eyes watching her as she slips below the surface of the water. She's too busy thinking about how she's going to give her everything to protect what little she has.

Is this what a ninja is? Naruto wonders. He can't stop trembling as he tries to look through the thick mist, clutching tight to his nee-san. Her arms crush his body against her so hard it's almost painful, and he knows she's nothing like what he thought she was.

Nee-san... Ryuishi-nee, she is *terrifying* . Her chakra is all around them, mixing with Kakashi-sensei's and no-brow's, and it's so heavy it crushes him. He can't breathe through it, and it makes him feel tiny and insignificant. She's never made him feel that way before, but her chakra slides against him, and it feels hungry and empty. It's like a falling in a deep hole forever.

She has a weapon in her hand before he can blink, and she's racing through the fog like she knows exactly where to go. She's not even breathing heavy as she sprints, and she shifts to carry him with one arm. One arm *only* . He never knew she was so strong.

He face is scary, her eyes narrow and cold, her mouth set into a thin line, and he wonders how she could hide this for so long.

Then she tells him to leave them behind, to take his friends and the strange boy and leave. She apologizes for keeping secrets, and she says she loves him like it's a goodbye.

His heart clenches, and he feels more afraid than ever. He can't just leave her. She's his *sister*, the lady who raised him and tucked him in at night. She made him meals and cleaned his house. No matter what secrets she kept, she loved him, and he loved her. Leaving her to those men, those evil monsters-he can't even imagine it.

He remembers those red clouds, and the look in their eyes when they came out of the trees.

"Not the team we're looking for," said the masked one. "Eliminate the witnesses. The jōnin has a sizable bounty, try not to ruin his head."

Then he knew fear, because they didn't even bat an eye when Sasuke attacked. The masked man had snatched him by his neck in mid-air, and he didn't even look at him.

Then there was screaming and yelling and talking. Sasuke's eyes turned red and started spinning before he was tossed aside. Kakashi-sensei was struggling against the silver haired man-

And the world disappeared in fog and everything started moving. Once again, when he needed her most, when he was afraid, she came for him. She scooped him up, and he saw it then. He saw the brown hand pointing at his nee-san.

He can't leave her, not when they are coming for her. Not when those evil bastards are trying to take her.

Then she's screaming, another thing he has never heard, and she peels him away like his grip means nothing. He desperately tries to cling, to stay with her, but she throws him like he weighs nothing, and he watches in horror as that white haired creep attacks her. He wails as he sails through the air, and he feels somebody catch him, but he doesn't care. His sister, his big sister. They're after her and she threw him away. She needs him, and he isn't there.

"Naruto, stay still," his sensei commands, but he won't! They need to go back, they need to save her!

"They came for her!" he cries out. "They want her, and now they have her! You said that people who abandoned their comrades were worse than trash! What does that make people who abandon their family!?"

He doesn't see his sensei's face, and he never notices the terrain change from street to water. He needs to go back- needs to get her-

He struggles as he is tossed once again, this time into a pile.

"Stay here," his teacher orders, and then he is swallowed by the fog.

Naruto scrambles up to dart after him, but a hand grabs his jacket and he trips. He whirls around ready to fight, but it is the boy that was with his nee-san before, and he is standing in between Sasuke and Sakura.

"Your master told you to stay," he says, and his voice is smooth and sweet even in stress.

"I don't care! Nee-san is out there, and she's fighting that white haired freak! She needs me-"

The boy jerks him forward with surprising strength, and he scans over him with critical eyes. "Zabuza-sama already went back for her. You would only get in their way, I will not hesitate to incapacitate you if you endanger my family," he informs Naruto sharply, and the younger boy takes a sharp intake of breath.

"Family?"

"Zabuza and Ryuishi raised me. They gave me a home, clothed and fed me. They are my family, and Ryuishi claimed you. She would be devastated if you were hurt, especially if she was the cause."

"She would never hurt me-!" Naruto protests, but he isn't allowed to finish his words. Instead, the boy violently turns him around and forces him to see.

Naruto notices for the first time that they are on a boat in the middle of the river, and that the thick fog is clearing up a bit, little by little.

Two figures stand on the water's surface, and one emerges partially from below. His sensei stands firm and watchful, and no-brows-Zabuza, he guesses-stands facing them, the giant sword in his hands coated with blood.

But most alarming is the way his sister emerges from the water, her lips pulled back into a snarl, her eyes wild and dead. She hovers near the men, her hair sticking to her face and neck, snapping words he can't quite hear.

Naruto does not know this woman. She isn't anything like the smiling image of his nee-san, the woman who taught him how to swim and stretch. She isn't the same person who played ball with him, or sang him to sleep. He looks at her, and knows she has killed. Knows she would rip apart anything in her path.

Is this what a ninja is? he wonders again.

"Zabuza-sama and Ryuishi-sama aren't like you Konoha ninja. Once they start, they cannot stop. There is a reason they were called monsters," the boy whispers to him. "I have seen her shatter limbs like glass, and I have seen him cut through bodies like paper. Your sensei may be able to keep up, but we will not. I have never seen them this serious before."

Naruto swallows the lump in his throat, and he feels fear once again.

"Will it be enough?" asks a small voice. He recognizes it as Sakura's.

Haku's face smooths out, and he grips his senbon in his hand tightly. He knows that Ryuishi was frantic, and that Zabuza was equally alarmed. He saw them leap into action, and their chakra mingles in the air, heavy and dangerous.

They are afraid of the men in black and red cloaks.

"I don't know," Haku says honestly.

AN: Hey, look, the Akatsuki, here to fuck shit up. But why? Also, hey, Naruto and team seven are like a charm that attracts bad luck, and when combined with Ryuishi, it turns into catastrophe. The feels keep rolling, teams interact, and a bigger

enemy rears its head. Two monsters emerge from a long hibernation, and there are so many important clues here. I... really like writing Hidan's special brand of you didn't know that Kakuzu is Ryuishi's bio father then just know that fact came out months ago in SGU. UuuUUUHHHHm. Blanking, because I know there are things I want to comment on, but I can't remember them.

May sweet things happen to my lurkers, favoriters, and followers. May my reviewers receive many fine quality gifts, both of things they desired, and things they did not know they needed until they had them.

May my Beta, Enbi, get like, a hoard of things, and a small dragon they can ride across the the world. Seriously, the formatting rocks in this because of them.

Question: What does Tenzo think of his friend Ryuishi? OR What was running through everybodies minds when Team Missing nin appeared out of the blue?

In Which a Choice is Made

I do not own Naruto. TW for gore and ultra violence, and minor mentions of previous abuse and trauma.

For Kakuzu, the story begins thirteen years ago, sitting alone in his room after the death of his most recent partner.

He's flipping through the newest releases of the bingo books and editing updated prices on bounties while searching for new faces. It's a common activity, one he partakes in on a bimonthly basis. He memorises habits, areas of common sightings, taste in partners and foods. Everything to better catch his targets, to trap them for a profit.

First is the issue from Iwa, which lists few interesting prospects. They have little worth, and therefore they are of no interest to him. Then comes the issues from Kumo, where the newest Hokage has been added, but Kakuzu ignores it despite the ridiculous number. He's had enough experience with Hokages, and it served him poorly in life. It is not something he would like to repeat.

Then comes the hardcover from Kiri, and he almost misses her. He glances at the picture, and his years of experience tell him that such a young face belongs to a genin, most likely wanted for defecting during the chaos of a battle. Kunai fodder, and more trouble than it's worth.

He continues on, the quiet scrape of pages filling his room before his brows furrow and he turns back.

The price is actually *more* than worth it.

Idly, he wonders what she did to occur such a high price for her head while he memorizes her known likes and dislikes. The crime isn't

listed, which is unsurprising. No need for other nations to know what weakness was exposed by a ninja's defection.

It turns out she's actually a chuunin, which is distantly impressive, and she specializes in a mid-range weapon and genjutsu, but holds a few years of front line combat experience. A veteran at eleven.

His brows furrow further, and behind his mask, he frowns. Eleven...

His acid green eyes slide over to the photograph once more, a standard three-quarter body shot used for identification. The face looking out of the page is decidedly unimpressed. Her expression is closed off, as if dealing with the standard procedure is more than she can bear, and her stance is guarded. She is ready to fight, even as the photograph is taken.

He notes the familiar features looking out at him. The black hair is nothing special, the sort of blue-black that can be found often in the Land of Fire, and isn't completely foreign to a place like the Land of Water. More common in his origin country of the Land of Waterfalls, but nothing too unique. The shape of her chin and nose are also indicative of such places, as is her skin color.

Kiri natives tend to have chalky, milky complexions and tall, sturdy builds. Her skin, however, is a golden tan that looks like it would deepen with a little sunlight. He supposes that she must have some Waterfall blood in her. When he looks in her eyes, however, he begins to wonder whose blood. He knows that look, the familiar set of those narrow eyes. He sees it every morning in the mirror.

Kakuzu flicks his eyes over to the birth date. October Tenth, which would have made her conception around January, eleven years ago.

Eleven years ago, he was taking a bounty in Water Country, which... well.

Well.

That day, he closes the book and slides it away from him. The chance is infinitesimally small. But if... if he waits to collect, her bounty can only get higher as well.

The story does not end there.

He watches distantly, closed off but curious. She disappears for a few years, and then emerges once more. She makes a name for herself among the bounty hunters, gaining a reputation. She's ridiculously hard to trap, and she is almost impossible to pin down. The databooks were wrong when they said she specialized in mid-range fighting, because her taijutsu is ruthless. She's got a build like a brawler, growing into her own with curves and literally killer muscles. She used to be part of a group that cut its teeth on the frontlines of the Third Shinobi War. One of the Kiri no Kaijū, she was known for her underwater combat capabilities, propensity for gory kills, and silent drownings.

Her bounty raises, but smaller details continue to go unknown. She doesn't have any discovered accomplices, or favored areas. She's a ghost, and running into her is more chance than skill.

Then Hoshigaki Kisame joins the Akatsuki, and something stirs inside of Kakuzu's mind at the sight of him. Another Kaijū, monstrous in his strength and stamina, with enough chakra to fill a sea. He's respectful, likeable even, but he doesn't talk about his team. He never utters a word about why he left, or what his goals are. He takes his orders; he does his job. He makes small talk, but he does not disclose personal details or habits. A professional, through and through.

That is until one day, her name comes up as a candidate for recruitment, and he sees something on Kisame's face twist, something that is at once resentment and longing. It irritates Kakuzu to some extent, though he does not know the reason why.

When the information is collected on her, Kisame is the first to snatch it up and read it. For a long time he stares inside the manilla

folder filled with paper. His fingers curl around the dossier, crumpling it more and more as time goes on. Then, his free hand curls into a fist right before he throws down the file and stalks away. He isn't seen again for a few days.

Kakuzu waits until the others have glanced over it before he looks over the information himself.

The new photograph holds his eyes like little else. She's older, and no longer so petite. Her skin has deepened in color to the exact shade of his own. There is no denying the similarities between the two of them now, not when her eyes are still the same shape, and her nose is a mimic of his own. Not when his strong build is the same as hers, sharing the same strength in their shoulders and core. Not when they have the same color to their scars.

He supposes he should probably feel something, anything at all, but it's the same idle, lazy curiosity he has had all along. The desire to know what she is, who she is, with no personal interest.

He feels nothing when Kisame takes her picture and hangs it up in his room, or when Kakuzu catches him staring at it pensively. He doesn't feel much at all when he confirms his suspicions through tests done by Orochimaru right before the man walks away from the group. But he doesn't know what to feel when he finds out her favorite food, or her rumored prowess.

He knows what to do when he meets Hidan, who takes one look at him and laughs like a lunatic.

"Seriously? It's fucking divine will, I'm telling you! You look just like that bitch, and your chakra is the same too. Except she was holy, and you're fucking disgusting," Hidan spits at him. "You'll fucking take me to her, though, and then we can witness how the offspring overcomes the parent."

Kakuzu tears his throat out so he won't have to listen to his babble anymore. It doesn't work, and he becomes aggravated at the way his

partner occasionally mentions her. He notices he only ever does it in the presence of Kisame once, though. The man shreds Hidan to ribbons with a meticulous cruelty Kakuzu had never actually seen in action before then.

Kisame stands above the pieces and spits on them. "Don't talk about them," he orders coldly. "It's not for outsiders like you."

Kakuzu sews his partner back together when ordered, days later. The man is quiet for once in his life, and unusually respectful.

"Why?" he asks, just once.

"He's a fucking sinner, but he's not mine to lead to the light," Hidan states casually when his tongue is put back in. "She already claimed that piece of shit."

The idea of his offspring sits in the back of his mind, unstudied and never brought to the front. He is casual in his opinion of her, not attached. When she is brought up, he remains distant and callous, because the A-ranked kunoichi of the Mist is nothing to him but a fleeting mistake on his part that quite literally took on a life of its own.

Then he can't quite remain aloof anymore, because she turns out to be much more than just a kunoichi.

Kakuzu isn't part of the gatherings between the Uchiha and Kisame, he isn't even aware of them. He isn't aware of the council between the supposed Madara and the two founders of the original Akatsuki. He isn't there to witness Hoshigaki Kisame first hear the tale of the Rakki Ryuu from the depths of an alleyway, spoken from one teen to a group of children.

In fact, nobody sees Kisame's breath hitch in his chest, or his eyes widen. Not a soul can tell of how he listened, enraptured and bewildered. Shadows cannot reveal how his hands curled into a fist when he first heard the name *Chujitsuna Same*, or *Odayaka Oni* . Bricks will not speak of his sharp teeth clenching together, his jaw

tight when the words, *Her team became her precious people, and she loved them*, echo off of the walls. But most of all, nothing can ever divulge the frustrated guilt he felt when it was revealed even in story form, how she waited for them to come back for her.

Kakuzu isn't aware of the multiple attempts to infiltrate her network since its very conception. He doesn't know the troubles the founders and Kisame faced when dealing with the original tight-knit community, who looked at the world around them with passive, distrustful eyes. Brothels work on apprenticeships, and none of them can afford to place a plant as a child and wait the years it would take them to be accepted into the network. No one is able to identify how so many plants are identified and isolated or fed false information as it is.

(Whores know their business. They know someone in their line of work, and a pretender. The Mumei in general know each other. Those in need they reach out to, but those asking about details, those who wait silently and treat others with disrespect, who abandon the cardinal rules, they are not Mumei, they are pretenders.

Everyone is worth something, this is the truth they know.

Choices are given and chosen freely, this too is law.

Strangers do not accept this, they do not live it.)

The traders offer an opportunity, but the Rakki Ryuu bypasses them by heading to the producers themselves. The Akatsuki has ninja subordinates, but none seemed to have and farmers or herders on their payrolls.

Kakuzu knows none of this, not that it would matter to him. In fact, it only becomes pertinent years later, when the myth becomes a target of the Akatsuki.

"The organization in question is multifaceted and seamless. From production to consumption, to travel and security, it has a monopoly

a large amount of goods and services, and seems to dabble in others which it doesn't outright own," intones their Leader. "Influence began somewhere in the Land of Water, but spread throughout the continent. The strongest points of authority appear to center around the Land of Rivers, the Land of Grass, and presumably the Land of Rice, though with its recent changes in security and rise to power, it cannot be made sure. This is neglecting sizable pocket populations spread through the continent. Members of the organization are almost impossible to tell apart from the general populace, and information is retrieved through multiple methods. Key members are unknown at this time, save for one."

Silence reigns undisturbed for a moment, and Kakuzu waits while ripple-patterned eyes land on him appraisingly.

"The head of this movement is known widely as the Rakki Ryuu. An alias for a far more bloodstained name, the Chigiri no Ningyo, who was born as Watanabe Ryuishi."

Well.

Well.

He flicks his gaze up from where it was, and he meets those distant eyes calculatingly while his partner begins to cackle. The Leader and Kakuzu ignore the outburst, something they have become used to doing.

"Rapid growth has stretched management thin, and information has come to us that the Ningyo will be somewhere in the northern section of the Land of Rivers for a short period of time. You will retrieve her, and bring her back. The Akatsuki has use of her resources."

Hidan sucks in a lungful of air, making an awful noise. A glance to the side reveals his mirth has left tears in his eyes.

"The bitch carved a place for herself from the flesh of the world," Hidan chokes out. "She ruined the fucking system and made her own. You're obsessed with cash, but she owns what you want to buy!"

Kakuzu clenches his fist silently, annoyed and impressed despite himself. Obviously fiscal knowledge is more genetically inheritable than he thought.

An empire. She started out with less than he had, no family beside a whore mother, no connections but ones she made, and against all odds she thrived. She overcame the Bloody Mist, she lived through the Third Shinobi War, she defected successfully, and she now surpassed his own skill with currency.

From production to consumption, he repeats in his head. She owned the market stalls and the workers inside them. She didn't stoop to pick off bounties, she set the prices on them. She set the prices on many things.

He still does not know her, still does not care for her, but he is... *intrigued* with her.

"A list of possible locations will be provided. She needs to be intact upon delivery, but coercion may be used if absolutely necessary. Identification can be confirmed by the mark on her back, or upon arrival. Dismissed," the Leader finishes. The smoky silhouette winks out of existence, leaving Kakuzu alone with his guffawing partner and a mission to complete.

It is not easy to find her, even with a lead as fortunate as this one. The rainforests are thick, and they bring back memories of his youth, spent inside the brother jungles of Waterfall. It leaves him oddly contemplative, and even more quiet than usual. His partner is less conversational as well, buzzing and twitching with some sort of anticipation. They search whole towns, sweeping down from the north. The two use Henge to disguise themselves as defectors,

hoping to draw any squad protecting her away to deal with minor disruptions.

They reach a place obviously containing shinobi. There is a clearing pockmarked with knife scratches and trees blasted by chakra. They wait, and eventually a team of Konoha nin greets them. Hatake Kakashi, with a bounty higher than most could imagine, and three little brats. Witnesses to be eliminated, and cash to be made.

Hatake is fast, granted, but he's no match for the two of them, especially with three obvious targets to distract him.

Then the moment comes, and Kakuzu catches his first glimpse of his offspring. It's certainly a cinematic one. A flicker out of the corner of his eye as the streets fill with thick, heavy fog and a chakra unlike anything he has ever felt before. She's good at stealth, as is the team she has brought. He didn't notice them until it was too late.

Surrounded by mist, she's running, snatching up a genin in her arms as if the child weighs nothing more than air. Her face is scrunched, and he recognizes the set of her sharp eyes and the line of her nose. He sees himself reflected, warped and mixed with another's blood. For a second all five hearts in his chest beat sluggishly, and the moment slows down.

He thought that outside of a photograph she might appear less like him, but even softened and rounded with femininity, his blood shines through. Her musculature and build is like his own, and for a moment, alarm races through him, not at the added opponents, but at her existence.

My actions resulted in a life, he thinks. It's never really struck him quite as hard before now, when he could deny the possibility of it. When she wasn't there, living and breathing before him.

He's raising his arm to grab her when time resumes, and a shower of warm blood coats his outstretched limb. Sensations leave him, and

he feels hollow as a shadow flickers past the same moment she disappears into the fog.

He hears the now familiar sound of a head cracking against the ground and curses being shouted, and he realizes somebody just attempted to assassinate Hidan. Not only that, but they were successful, or they would have been had his partner been mortal.

The white haired annoyance is screeching at him, and Kakuzu moves methodically, unthinking. He stitches the other man's head back on robotically, trailing behind as the zealot leaps forward into the cloud to chase after the target.

There is obviously some sort of alliance between the teams, which is a new and annoying factor to consider. At most, there were supposed to be guards, not a fully functioning unit, let alone two. It also implies previous contact with an established power, something that only makes her more valuable to the Akatsuki.

He stalks the streets silently, his heavy frame feeling far older than it ever has before as he approaches the river. He hears the sound of fighting, and the distant rush of water. He remembers the names she has earned, and the tactics she is known for.

The bird mask is crawling out of his back before he can blink, tendrils coalescing into a beastly form before slithering forward into the water. His footsteps ripple as he touches the liquids surface, and he finally gives into Hidan's request.

A wind technique, and visibility returns. He has a clear view of two men guarding a drifting barge, but no woman is there to be seen.

"Took you long enough, you old fuck," spits Hidan, who waits ahead of him. If a fool like him is stalling for time, then even he must realize that these people are not to be taken lightly.

"Where?" Kakuzu asks simply.

Hidan's face scrunches up for a moment before he spits into the water, letting out an annoyed noise from somewhere in the back of his throat. "Somewhere beneath us. Her chakra is mingling with everybody else's, makes it hard to pin down. Fucking sneaky bitch."

"She needs to be alive when we take her. Control yourself."

The Demon of the Mist snarls gutturally, and Kakuzu lets his eye wash over his form. He recognizes him, how could he not? The final member of the Kiri no Kaijū, and most likely the one who decapitated Hidan. It seems like Kisame's team had a reunion without him.

"I ain't gonna kill the bitch, I'm not fucking dumb. The others won't be so fucking fortunate though," Hidan threatens. He raises his scythe, and in that moment the world shifts.

Kakuzu spots a ripple from the corner of his eye, and a wave of killing intent, potent even to him, washes through the air. He flings himself back on instinct, but the world slides and his stomach twists inside his torso.

Fear unlike anything he has ever known rushes through his veins, and he tries to break free, but his limbs are weak and useless. He's pinned down, and the ghostly sensation of hands running over his body is obscene and unwanted, made worse by the actual hands forcing his small body to remain still.

Metal stings his neck, cold and painful. He feels warmth only when the blood begins to flow over his skin, and fire burns as the blade goes deeper. They cut him with perfect precision, tearing open his neck so the flesh parts, but the veins remain. He tries to scream, tries to curse and break the hold, but he is nothing, he is useless and weak, and he is so very afraid.

Gold eyes stare down impassively as his voice is taken from him. They watch as he tears his nails out, scrabbling for purchase on

stone floors, the tips of his fingers scraped raw by desperate scratching.

He's cold, so cold, and there is no one. No money, no life, no power. There is nothing.

There is only nothing.

Sensation is torn from him, like air being knocked from his lungs. There is no light, and there is no dark. There is only the endless abyss, crawling inside of him, urging him to let go. To give up what he holds on to, but he cannot. It is all he is, and he-

-shouts in garbled agony as lightning tears through the canine mask is on his back, impaling his torso.

The sound of a thousand chirping birds sings to him as his body seizes, breaking him out of the genjutsu. He chokes on what little saliva there is in his mouth, as a sword cuts through the air towards his head.

It stops only when it meets a scarlet scythe, which emerges from the water like a missile. The swordsman bounces away from the blow, but the scythe continues its flight, dragging a soaked Hidan from the depths, who seems to be spewing an entire pool's worth of water out of his lungs through his mouth and nose. A short blade appears to be jutting out near his spine, precariously close to a paralyzing blow, and his sleeve flutters oddly by his left arm. The water beneath him begins to froth wildly, waves forming, a rip current bubbling up as two opposing forces clash beneath him. The Copy-nin staggers, and the ninjutsu is dislodged from his chest. It gives Kakuzu the opportunity to land a punishing blow to the Copy-nin's temple before leaping away, using his speed to his advantage.

The murky river churns like a living thing, and the sound of rushing rapids fills the air as two currents rise above the surface. He spots the tangled form of his Earth Grudge Fear, its bird masked cracked, as it streams by him. Then, he sees *her* once more.

Hidan has left his mark, and if it was any place but water, she would be captured by now. Her pant leg is torn open by her thigh, and he catches wisps of red in the liquid before it is washed away. Her ribs bend oddly inward on one side, and she looks to have taken a blow to the head.

Regardless, he realizes now how she earned her names. Her hair, knocked loose and free from the strike to her head, whips around her. Caught in the current, the long black strands defy understanding, straining like the tendrils his body is made of. She bares her teeth like a beast, her dark eyes locked onto her opponent, and the air warps again with that chakra, hollow and empty.

Then the current takes her, and she streamlines herself, pushed along by several tons of rushing water. She circles around the dome shaped protrusion of river, and she slams bodily into the masked creature so hard it forces them both out of the water.

They both come hurtling at him.

He detaches both his arms, and a writhing nest of tendrils emerge, snatching the heavy creature from the air, mixing it's threads with his own. He begins assimilating the cracked mask back into his body at the same time he begins ensnaring the girl. She thrashes against him, and for a moment he remembers her genjutsu.

He brushes the thoughts aside, reabsorbing his Suiton aligned heart into his body, studying the woman caught in his threads. Lines of black wind around her limbs, and she strains against them. There is an admittedly impressive amount of force behind her struggle, but he would expect nothing less at this point.

Wet hair clings to her, much like his own has a tendency to do, and this close he can notice the thickness of it as well as the length. She snaps her teeth at a thread that comes too close, her teeth clacking together loudly.

"Watanabe Ryuishi," he intones seriously. The name feels strange in his mouth. "The Akatsuki has use for you."

Black eyes latch onto him, and she pants for breath. "Lose," she wheezes.

He narrows his eyes at her.

"You *lose*," she hisses again, and he notices a slur to her words.

Kakuzu doesn't understand until a howl cuts through the air. His gaze turns away from the woman in his hold, and drifts to where the Copy-nin and the Demon have engaged Hidan far away from him, downriver. In the distance he spies his partner's shirtless form swinging his weapon wildly, the empty sleeve of his cloak finally explained. His left arm is a messy stump from the elbow down, and needles coat his form. Even from this distance Kakuzu can tell his movements are slowed down, full of openings that the Copy nin and wielder of Kubikiribōchō do not hesitate in taking advantage of.

Little by little, they are carving away at Hidan.

He turns his gaze back on to her, and he notes how his tendrils sink on one side of her torso, where her ribs caved inward before. He notes the bright red blood mingling with water, leaking quickly out of her leg and into the river, and the unfocused nature of her dilated pupils. Distantly, he is impressed. It takes a brutal kind of honesty to know there is no winning against an opponent, and a spiteful kind of cunning to go to the lengths she has.

This was a trap all along. It began with the genjutsu, a cleverly formed attack to not hold him, but to shake him. While she pulled Hidan underwater, presumably under a genjutsu as well, it left the other two free to attack him, and had the genjutsu held a bit longer, he would have been headless.

Meanwhile, she did as much damage as possible underwater to his partner, not to destroy him, but to open him up and soften him to

oncoming attacks, and to force him, disoriented and under attack, to lash out without control. She used the terrain to her advantage, having experience in underwater combat where his partner had none. Strikes would flow slower in the liquid, and movement would be awkward even for the best taijutsu user. Not enough for her to win, but enough to put Hidan at a serious disadvantage.

Of course, it came at a price, and it was interrupted by his Earth Grudge Fear.

Still, enough of his arm was missing to grant openings. The arm itself was probably somewhere far downstream, along with the pieces they carved from him.

And if all else failed, the price of her battle with Hidan made the mission useless. Kakuzu could re-attach body parts, and he could even seal up the wound on her leg. He couldn't take the blood out of her lungs from where her ribs poked through them, crushed into her organs as they were. He couldn't stop the quickly oncoming unconsciousness from her head wound, or replace the blood she already lost. He was no medic, head trauma was a mystery to him.

The Akatsuki had no use for a corpse.

She laughs, a wet, bubbling sound that brings up frothy blood to her lips, staining them crimson. The more she strained, the less chance there was at recovery.

Hidan's foul mouth cuts through the air, and there is the sound of thrashing in the water, followed by rapidly advancing footsteps.

"Can't swim with no fucking legs," she bites out.

"The needles," Kakuzu realizes. "The ones in Hidan, they were in nerve clusters to keep him from moving fast."

"Too close to the barge," she growls. "Too close to my children."

Kakuzu isn't going to look too hard into that statement, but he is rapidly thinking. Someone with that kind of knowledge of the human body is most likely more skilled at the medical arts, but it would take a miracle to get her to last the journey now, and Ame isn't known for its medical expertise. The odds are high that she is going to fall unconscious for a long while before the day is done, and her condition will only continue to deteriorate.

Kakuzu does not desire to face three opponents of their skill level alone, either. He is stronger than any one of them, yes, but combined, The Copy-nin, the Demon, and the Ningyo are formidable. A team no one expected, and therefore no one was prepared to face.

If he continues to engage them, Hidan's body parts will be scattered further and further apart, and more importantly, the target will receive more damage, lowering her chances of survival even further. But if there is an medic-nin on her team, there is a good chance she can be stabilized until better care is available.

Kakuzu has seconds to make a decision, and it becomes obvious when he hurls her away from him and jumps back, retreating from the oncoming storm of kunai. He has just enough time to see the swordsman glaring at him, his eyes full of hatred, before he catches her and Kakuzu disappears.

He fades into the jungle while the teams regroup, and he can't help but thinking that his offspring is more cunning than she is given credit for. She had mere minutes to plan, to calculate what everyone would do, and it spoke of her understanding of the people around her that it succeeded. It's not easy to pull a victory from such an utter loss like she has, but he can call her actions nothing else.

You lose, he hears inside his head. Her voice is huskier than her would have thought, but it, at least, is nothing like his own.

I lose, he agree silently.

This time.

Ryuishi, for once, can feel the amount of pain she's in. Frankly, she's not really happy about it.

Hidan had come leaps and bounds from the youth in the alleyway she fought, and even in her terrain, he was a beast. He was fast as hell underwater, and spry like a damn weasel. He did more damage to her in minutes than most could do in hours.

She fights unconsciousness back, her head pounding like a drum. It's agony to breathe, and she can feel wetness bubbling inside her chest. There is the telltale sensation of broken glass running through her body that lets her know that her last stunt with the water used up far too much chakra.

Still, she is far more concerned with the blood leaking from Zabuza's temple, and the droop she can see in his shoulder.

"Zabuza," she gurgles, her hand reaching for his head.

She feels his finger dig into her arms and leg, and she thinks it would be really funny that he was carrying her bridal style if they weren't beat to shit.

"I'll kill him," her partner spits, and she smiles, smearing the trail of red on his head. The monster inside her head agrees. They'll kill those dumb fucks, just like they always have.

"S'kay," she wheezes. "Everyone's 'kay."

A shadow falls over her, and she catches a flash of white hair and a grey eye. Hatake looks like shit, and for some reason that's hilarious to her. She tries to laugh, but pain lances through her being, and her vision momentarily goes black. Her ears ring, and the feeling of pressure in her head makes it feel like it's about to explode.

"-needs a medic-"

She feels the sensation of movement, and not that she knows it, she is being rushed to the barge. All she can see is the night sky and the green leaves that are little more than blurs as her vision slowly returns.

Zabuza lays her down on something hard, and she whines at the loss of his heat. She's freezing cold, and it feels like ice is creeping over her, like frost is shooting through her veins.

Somebody is leaning over her, and she hears crying in the distance. She looks up to see Haku, his face grave, and moisture in his eyes. There is suddenly heat by her ribs, the faint buzzing of medical ninjutsu.

"S'okay," she tries to soothe. "They're gone. Don' cry."

She hates it when her boys cry. It always pricks at her, and she can never forget it. In fact, she can hear Naruto's gross sobbing somewhere. He'll need comforting next.

"Stop talking," Haku snaps. He struggles to focus with all the noise around him, Sakura's weeping and Naruto's sobbing, and his own vision blurring. The two jounin watch him quietly, but he isn't a miracle worker.

Her ribs are in her lungs, and there is blunt force trauma to the head. Her thigh won't stop bleeding, because they nicked the femoral and she's never, ever been this bad before.

"Senbon," he demands, and a shaky hand reaches into his leg pouch and pulls one free. He takes it from Sakura as she goes back to putting pressure on the thigh wound.

In front of him, Zabuza grunts as his shoulder is jerked back into place by Kakashi.

"Somebody get the tubing out of my back pouch!" Haku orders, and he sees Naruto scramble to fulfill the order.

Haku focuses on shifting the broken ribs out of her lungs as carefully as possible with one hand, while the other darts forward with pinpoint accuracy and jabs the needle into an already existing opening in between the third and fourth rib. Ryuishi tries to scream, and the sound makes him choke back a sob because it's mixed with so much fluid. She thrashes weakly, and for a moment he panics as she knocks Sakura away, but strong arms pin her shoulders down, and another body forces her legs to still.

"Idiot," Zabuza grumbles as he leans down to secure her. "Self sacrificing *idiot* ."

Haku gets back to work as tubing is pushed into his hands, and with quickness he wasn't sure he had, he pushes the tubing in near the needle, using it as a guide. It fills with crimson froth as soon as he feels it slip into the lung, and the awful hissing sound resumes every time she tries to breath.

"She needs to be tilted," he chokes out. "So it can drain. With her ribs... it's going to hurt. A lot."

Haku looks up, and he meets his master's eyes. Zabuza looks at him searchingly for a moment, and Haku feels so scared, because he has never seen his family hurt this bad. This is nothing like the gashes and cuts he's dealt with before.

The bandages around his face are flecked crimson, and his head is still bleeding as well. There is water everywhere, and he- he-

Zabuza moves, tilting her on her side. She opens her mouth, and Haku will forever remember the way she wails, long and bubbling and high. Her open mouth fills with red foam, and a steady stream oozes out of her, coating the barge and his knees.

"Keep her awake," Haku cries, moving jerkily down to the small hands on her thigh.

Big green eyes look up at him while he wipes the tears out of his eyes with the sleeve of his robe. The robe she bought for him.

Haku refuses to give up, and he places his trembling hands over the smaller pair. Both are already coated in wet, sticky blood. He can feel it in between his fingers, gumming them up, and making his palms slick. He can feel the warmth of it even as he touches her cold skin, and he is so angry, because it's supposed to be inside of her.

"Thank you," he remembers to say to the girl, because Ryuishi didn't raise rude children. She would wake up and chastise him if she found out he was rude. She *would* .

"You," Sakura manages to get out, before she takes a deep, shuddering breath. "Y-You saved us. S-She f-fought for us, and n-now-"

Haku doesn't see the tears slip down her face. He's far too focused on mending up an artery as best he can, praying a clot won't form. Kakashi catches it, though, and he feels like he's watching his teammates' deaths all over again. He can feel blood on his hands, and pain radiating through his body. His jaw aches, and his wrist may be crushed. He's low on chakra and beaten down harder than he has been in a long time, and all he can think about is how wrong he was.

Watanabe came back. After everything was said and done, she came back for them. She threw herself into the line of fire against opponents she knew were leagues above them, and fought with every fiber of her being to protect them.

Kakashi knows her screams will echo in his nightmares, right along Obito's crushed body and Rin's final words. The sight of her throwing Naruto to him, angry and desperate, right before that madman

attacks her will haunt him as long as he lives. It will linger like her gurgling laugh and bloodstained smile.

Her teammate growls to her, and Kakashi watches as he leans forward close enough to press their foreheads together. He witnesses Naruto shaking and sobbing, and Sakura weeping as Sasuke lays stunned behind them all, his own fists quivering as from the aftermath of his first real battle, awakening his sharingan, and having his worldviews turned on their head.

(Missing-nin are supposed to be bad, Sasuke repeats in his head again and again. They looked bad, and they acted discourteously. They were supposed to fit inside the box that defined them. But...

There was nothing evil about the swordsman's desperate whispering. There was nothing terrible about how the stranger saved his life, or how they all fought when he couldn't.

There was something terrible and empty about the woman's chakra, and it was the reason his Sharingan deactivated, but it wasn't evil. They were people, and they felt pain. They felt love, and they were a family, and they were afraid for her. *He* is afraid for her.

He's so afraid.)

Kakashi isn't sure when she started silently crying from the pain, or when Naruto started holding her hand, or when Sakura began fussing over him as well. He isn't sure at what point Sasuke got up to clean the blood from Haku's arms and to dab the sweat and tears from his face. He's not even sure when he leaned forward and joined Zabuza in attempting to keep her awake.

He only knows that she's important. She makes herself important, because she comes into a life, and for all her plots and schemes, she *cares*. For all her bluster and lies, her politicking and plotting, she has never gone into something without caring.

He knows her. He knows the tricky kunoichi she can be, the ninja that took down a squad of hunter-nin, and the one that never leaves a trail. He knows the woman who can destroy a clearing full of carnivores five times her size, and who can tear the arm clean off a man.

But more than that, Kakashi knows the girl who taunted a team of hunter-nin for a drunken man she found in the red light district. He knows the girl who cried out for her team alone in the rain, ruined and beaten down, bleeding and sick. He knows the woman who proclaimed her hate for the instructors who did nothing for her fellow students, and who woke up at night caught inside flashback of a war she was thrust into. He knows the woman who nervously sat and asked for a friend, files in her hand, and the one who came into his life and changed it completely.

Kakashi knows the Ryuishi that would say she cut all ties with Konoha, but the moment he signaled for her, was there to help.

"Stay awake," he begs.

He doesn't care just about how the world would react. He isn't thinking about Konoha, or the Elemental Nations. This isn't about politics, or criminals, or laws. This is personal. Kakashi doesn't want her hurt, he doesn't like that she's bleeding out, and that her skin is colder than ice. He doesn't like seeing her crying and covered in blood. He doesn't like her blood staining the barge, or the way her grip is failing in the swordsman's hands.

This is personal, and she is important to him.

Ryuishi's important to everybody.

Kakashi doesn't know their stories inside and out. He doesn't know how a little girl caught the attention of a little boy in Kiri, and how he claimed her as his. Of how that little girl and that little boy grew closer, and even after his worst mistake, she never left him behind. He wasn't there for the battles they fought, the loss of squad eleven,

or the unification of monsters underneath their leader. He didn't live through years of feeling like maybe things were okay, because they all had each other, and that was enough, only for it to be broken. There was no epic journey for him, no adopted son, and no years on the beach like they dreamed of when they were young. He doesn't know the story of Zabuza and Ryuishi, partners even before the war.

He doesn't know how a young boy, cast from his home, starving on the streets and uncomfortable in his skin found a family. Of how two adults stepped up to raise a strange child that had no blood relation to either of them. He wasn't there to follow Zabuza across the continent to search for a myth, and to find a place he called home. He didn't live through years of feeling uncomfortable and worthless in his own body only to be unconditionally loved and accepted by her. There was no time living on the streets, years being hidden in Kiri, or finding a home when there was none. He doesn't know the story of Haku and his family, beloved child and apprentice.

He doesn't know the history of the lost blond boy, shunned and ostracized by a whole village. Of what it is like to be four and all alone in the world, to scream for somebody, anybody at all to notice him. He wasn't there to find a stranger in a dumpster, to take them home and have them become everything he ever wished for. He didn't have somebody call him family when the world called him a demon, to go from having nobody, to more people than he can name in one breath. He didn't live through loneliness and hate only for a stranger to brush them away and pick him up in her arms, and let him know he was good enough. There was no afternoons in the park, bedtime stories unlike any other, or radiant Fairy-nee. He doesn't know the whole story of Naruto, Sunshine and little brother.

All he knows is that she has made herself a part of so many lives. He knows he's scared, because she's lost too much blood, and her eyes aren't tracking correctly. She's taken a serious blow to the head.

"Stay alive," he whispers again, his hand firm on her knee, keeping it pinned as the swordsman talks to her.

For a moment, her gaze shifts and pierces him. He notices a piece of her wet hair has pasted itself on her bloodstained lips, and she smiles weakly at him. It makes him want to *scream* .

He sees her look at the faces around her. There is a moment of half lucidity, where she notices the two teams working in tandem for one goal, and she smiles wide even though she must be in agony.

"S'kay," she forces out, and she looks at Zabuza.

"I can't," he hears Haku confess. "I can't fix her head. I'm not... it would take a genius-"

His stomach sinks, but Zabuza signals he's heard. Kakashi looks at Ryuishi, scanning her face, and he gently moves his hands away from her shoulders. She winces at the loss of contact and the movement.

"Hatake," Zabuza intones, and Kakashi peels his eyes away to look at him. "Konoha has medical experts."

"The best in the world," answers Kakashi, and he understands what Zabuza is getting at. He can do this, he will do this. He might say it's a political move, or that it's a parley, or a treaty, or *something* . She's there because she's an ally, because she proved herself loyal on the field, because she gave years of information, because she protected a village asset, and because she was an asset herself. He can give it a million names, and a million justifications.

"We won't leave her," Zabuza states, but Kakashi wouldn't expect them to. He can build up reasons for them as well.

"Then don't," Kakashi states.

Zabuza seems to search him for a moment, but in the end, his eyes land on her again. It seems they have reached an understanding, then.

"Sleep," Zabuza tells her quietly. "But wake up again," he adds.

The relief is palpable on her face, and her lashes flutter closed as she stops fighting an unseen battle.

"S'okay," she whispers, and Kakashi feels sorrow and determination well up in his chest. He meets eyes with Zabuza's once more, and he knows the other man feels the same.

She will be safe. They will make sure of it.

AU: So guess who heavily considered killing the main character in this chapter? It was me. Anyway, about one more chapter until this arc comes to a close, and we've gone through a lot of growth here. The characters are beginning to understand each other. Even scarier, Ryuishi's close people are beginning to notice her, and what drives her. Also, in case it wasn't clear enough, Ryuishi figured out that they were there for her, and she figured if she was out of the picture, the Akatsuki had no reason to remain around the teams. She put Hidan under a genjutsu and provoked him to the point of no return, knowing she couldn't win. Also, Kakuzu is impressed by her, but holds no actual emotional ties. TBH I have no idea how dad's feel. Someone explain.

A shout out to my lurkers, favoriters, and followers. Many fine gifts for my reviewers, because it's you guys who keep me motivated and churning out chapters.

A divine screech to the heavens for my beta enbi, who helps me find the plot when I lose it. I OWE THEM SO MUCH *Gross sobbing*

QUESTION: How does Kisame react to the Zombie Combo's unfortunate screw up, and the info they bring back? OR What was Hidan thinking about during the fight? OR What were the children thinking about?

In Which Ripples Occur

I do not own Naruto.

Zabuza hates it when she is pale.

Even when there was no sun in the sky, and their world was obscured by fog and mist, she wasn't pale. When she was in the academy, she was the color of sand, golden and rich, and in the war, she stained that gold with crimson. She stood out in a village where most were milky and chalky.

After they were reunited, she was butterscotch and bronze, brought to life by the sun. It touched her, and it made her even more colorful. She took it into her skin and it gave her warmth she could not make on her own.

Her eyes are the deep black of a night sky without a moon, endless and forever, and her scars are the muted pearlescent purple of dusk. She dusts her eyelids with silvers, golds, bronzes, blues, and greens, and she adorns herself with all the hues under the sun.

She's colorful, and she isn't meant to be pale.

He and Kisame saw her like this only once, because they only ever let it happen one time. When Squad Eleven was ambushed, she wore herself down too far, took too many wounds. She could barely even swim, and it was Kisame who had jumped in after her and pulled her out of the ocean. They closed the wounds the best they could while she shivered and shook, and they tucked her between them, hoping that their warmth would keep her alive. In the morning, she barely stirred, and her skin was ashen and pale. She had to be carried back to Kirigakure, and it took days for her to finally stabilize.

They trained her after that, watched out when she reached the state when she could no longer pull back. She did the same for them, kept them safe and tended.

Now he can say he's seen her colorless twice.

He feels cold now, looking at her prone form. He knows he isn't, because when he touches her skin, it feels like ice and steals the heat from his palms. He's still as warm as he ever was, and she's far colder than he remembers.

He does it just so her body can take the warmth from him, can seep strength where it needs it. Maybe if he does it long enough, her color will return as well. He isn't the sun, but she's always chosen him before now. He's always been good enough before now, before he let her trick them all into turning away for the slightest second. He knows better than most what she can do when given the opportunity.

He brushes a stray lock of hair away from her face, tucking it behind her ear. She looks like she's sleeping, her face relaxed and relieved of tension. It's not the frozen features of death, or the scrunched expression she wears when she has night terrors. It is a deep unconsciousness, so deep no one can wake her.

"Idiot," he mumbles. Because she is one, an idiot to the highest degree. He doesn't care what plans she made, or tricks she was playing. He doesn't care how smart she thought it was, or if she believed it was her only option. He knows it's part of some scheme, but he doesn't care. She's an idiot for getting hurt, and he's a fool for not watching her closer.

She's always done this. This stupid act where she takes more damage than she can sustain, where she drives attention towards herself so it won't be on others. Like some sort of sacrifice, because she has stupid thoughts about not being good enough. Idiotic ideas about how other people are better, are worth more, or are somehow deserving.

Zabuza doesn't think so. Zabuza thinks the world can go fuck itself as long as a specific few are alright, and that specific few includes her. In fact, she may be the founding member of that group. She was the first that he wanted to claim, and in return, be claimed by. It was the demon boy and his pet before it was the Kaijuu, and he can't imagine life without her.

He can't change her, though, not this part. He thought he was strong enough to wipe out anyone who would push her to this point, to crush them before she could throw herself in the line of fire.

It took just two men in black cloaks with red clouds to prove him wrong.

Now they're on a barge to the Land of Fire, and Haku is only sleeping because he's been ordered to after wearing himself out by checking on her constantly. There are foreign ninja and strange civilians, and it's the sort of chaos she would delight in, with children and emotions and traveling. But she has a tube sticking out of her side where her ribs are still healing, and she's only clean because somebody else washed the flecks of blood and stink of river off of her.

He rests silently by her side in his chair, his own arm wrapped, and the wound at his temple healed. He had some other injuries, but despite what Haku said, he would be fine. He would be fine, and eventually, so would she.

She would want him here, anyway. She hates sleeping alone, and the cabins are all too cold for her. He knows they would be, that's why he scavenged the thickest blankets around and draped them over her. It's why he won't let her go, because she's always cold, and she feels colder than ever before. She hates the cold, and it's his job to keep her warm.

This one thing, this *one* thing he will not fail at.

So he holds her hand in his and lets it seep the heat away. She has always been a bit smaller than him, but like this it is especially obvious. He can trap her palm in his without trouble, and curl his fingers around hers.

He'll wait for her to wake up. After all, she waited years for him to come home.

Naruto practices his newly-earned skill yet again, sweat beading on his forehead. He grits his teeth as he carefully walks a vertical line up the side of a pole, focusing on controlling the chakra going to his feet. It's hard, because his mind keeps wanting to focus on the passing tree, or the people quietly talking, or a thousand other things, but he forces himself to.

He has to get better.

He's never felt so helpless in all his life. Not when he was alone, without family and friends. Not when he was first waiting for Ryuu-nee to come back. Not when he failed his first exam, or kept missing his targets with kunai, or couldn't write his kanji. Nothing felt as bad, he'd never felt as empty and weak.

He hates it. He hates that he had to stand by and watch, that the raw power of the strange men had him stiff and frozen in fear, that he couldn't fight them, that *he couldn't protect her* -

"Naruto, you're pushing yourself too hard," Sakura says from below, interrupting his thoughts.

At another point in time he would be bragging about his progress to her, delighted that somebody could see how far he had come. But now, it's not about lording his delight over others. It's not about being better than Sasuke, or showing the world that it was wrong. It's more than that.

" *Shinobi and kunoichi... There is death in their lives, Naruto.*"

He can hear her voice, the words she said when he asked what a ninja was, so very long ago. They echo inside his head, right beside the long, haunting wail that she let out when they tipped her over on her side to let the blood out.

This is his sister, the person who raised him. She is family, and he doesn't care what anybody says. He's going to get better, better than Sasuke, better than the pretty boy. He's going to be better than No-Brows and Kakashi. He's going to get so strong it makes those two freaks look tiny in comparison, and he's going to make sure nobody ever hurts his family again. Because he's Uzumaki Naruto, and he refuses to be the type of ninja that his big sister described, and if there isn't a way to do that, then he'll make one. He'll start small, like everybody else, with chakra exercises and kunai practice. He'll work his way up, and he won't ever forget where he came from.

"Naruto, are you listening?"

Fuck the rules that say he's not supposed to be friends with that boy who was with Ryuu-nee! Screw the system that says Ryuu-nee and Kakashi-sensei need to fight because of where they were born, or what they did before they even met! The laws that say he can't have her as his family and that ninja need to watch their friends die can go suck a weiner for free!

"My nindō," he grits out, sliding his foot upward. "I won't let it happen."

"Naruto, you're mumbling gibberish and I'm not sure when you last ate," Sakura scolds.

He turns from the top of the pole, looking at her from above. His blue eyes blaze, and he clenches his hand into fists in determination. "I won't watch my precious people die, Sakura. That will be my ninja way," he says. "So I need to get stronger! I can't quit, not until I can smash those guys who hurt Ryuu-nee!"

"Naruto," Sakura exhales softly, looking up at him with a mix of helplessness, worry, and awe.

Beside her Sasuke watches, and he approves. It's a good goal, and protecting family is what his goal would have been, had he any family left. The missing-nin who raised Naruto protected them all, and she was more family to Naruto than any actual blood relation.

It was strange that she was a missing-nin, and her squad was odd, but Sasuke won't deny that they earned his respect in the smallest amount.

Still, all the surprises and past few weeks aside, if the idiot keeps pushing himself, he's bound to die before he can progress. The woman is in a coma, and it's not like she's going anywhere away from them. They all have time to train, and there's no point in running themselves ragged.

"Idiot," he drawls. "Take a break."

Naruto puffs up angrily. "Or what, you dick? Are you going to make me?" he snaps.

"No," says another voice to their right. "but I will."

The three genin turn to the newcomer, looking up at the form of their sensei. He stands with his arms crossed, looking imperiously down at the trio. His wrist is smothered in a makeshift cast, and his wounds have been bandaged, but even the obvious injuries cannot detract from his commanding presence.

"Pushing yourself to the point of exhaustion does nobody any good, Naruto. Get down and eat something before you pass out," Kakashi-sensei orders.

Naruto grits his jaw and turns to look away, mumbling under his breath.

"Hurting yourself isn't going to help her either, you idiot!" snaps Sakura. "Getting stronger doesn't happen in a second! It's a journey, and you can't cram it into a couple of weeks. Those guys were so above genin level it's not even funny, so quit acting like you could have done something," Sakura says, and she clenches her fist. "We would have just gotten in the way."

"That kid on their team fought, and he's around our age!" Naruto fires back.

"His name is Haku," Sasuke states calmly.

"And he is at least a chūnin," Kakashi finishes. "He's also a long-range fighter, by the looks of it. Senbon can be thrown from farther away than even kunai, and none of you have been trained in the same areas he has."

"So I have to train now! Get me some needles and I can start right away!" Naruto states, flipping down from his perch. His knees buckle for a moment, but Sakura reaches an arm out to steady him. "I can even go ask him to help!"

"Haku was ordered to rest by Zabuza," Kakashi informs the team. "Because he was pushing himself too hard. He, at least, had the good sense to listen."

Naruto's excitement flags a bit with the new information, and his shoulders droop. He is very tired, but he has to know-

"She'll wake up, right?" he asks quietly, his face turning to the ground. "If we get her to Konoha, and they help, she'll wake up?"

Sakura's hand moves from where it was pushing his chest to help keep him upright and wraps around his shoulders. She moves in closer, a silent sign of support, and even Sasuke takes a step closer as well.

"If I know her, she'll get up and be far more worried about why you were pushing yourself so hard," Kakashi answers. It's a low blow, and the boy winces, but Kakashi doesn't feel guilt for it.

"Go get food and rest. I don't want to see you up here again until tomorrow."

"Yes, sensei," Naruto agrees wearily, and he drags himself with Sakura's assistance to the shared cabin.

Sasuke remains long enough to shoot him a poisonous look that speaks volumes of his opinion on the statement before jogging to keep up with the other two, going to brace Naruto's other side, and at least Kakashi can say this disaster has been a unifying experience for his team.

But that's about all he can state.

In accordance to shinobi law, as a handler, he does have a right to bring in an asset for long-term health care, especially one who has a history of working with the village, and who has been as beneficial as she has been. In fact, if she was just an informant, even her team would be granted amnesty as long as they upheld the laws inside Konoha and remained under control.

But the fact remains that she is anything but a simple informant, and there is a political minefield set around the terms and conditions of her stay. Her association with not only him, but Naruto and her team makes everything messy, especially since she cannot clarify her purposes for involvement.

He plans to sell it as a decision made for the betterment of his village. She not only respected his limits in the field by remaining out of touch, but the moment another asset to the village was in danger, she leapt into the fray against far stronger opponents, displaying dedication and loyalty.

... Only, when he says it like that, it sounds cold and sterile, far removed from actual events. It feels like he's belittling what happened, how much she's given.

The more he learns about what she's done, the more he realizes how much she's undersold herself. For all of the complications that have risen up from her existence, for all the bad she has done, she has made so much more better.

How regularly did she do charity like building spillways? How many educational establishments was she involved in, bringing knowledge and tolerance where there was none? How many groups like the one in Shimo has she strung together, turning strangers and enemies into allies and friends? How many people has she changed, fates rearranged, and tragedies avoided?

Without her, where would Zabuza be? Where would Haku be? What would Tenzō have become, with only Kakashi as an example? Where would Naruto be without his sister?

And for that matter, where would he himself be? What kind of person would he have been if she never came? If she never came and forced him into socialization, pushing him back into the world of reality, when he was locked in the past? What would he have focused on, if not all the puzzles and schemes she set? The death of his team? Stuck inside ANBU, wearing away at his humanity little by little, day by day?

He doesn't know.

Kakashi breathes in the afternoon air, and he scans the surroundings once again, just to be safe. He wants to stop thinking in circles, asking questions he can't answer.

A good man, he thinks, recalling the words she said.

Kakashi doesn't know what kind of man he is. He wouldn't call somebody who was too stubborn to admit a friendship with another

person for eight years good, nor would he say that a man who let that same person struggle alone for years without assistance was anything like good.

A friend wouldn't let a friend face bounty hunters alone. They wouldn't take their secrets and trust with one hand and attempt to undermine and appropriate them with the other. A friend didn't dehumanize their friend by calling them an 'asset', and they would have asked why they became missing-nin at all.

Kakashi never did any of those things.

It's no wonder she was willing to call their association off. She started this deal in an effort to gain a friend, and he hadn't even been fulfilling those loose guidelines. If any any established nation had treated their assets like that, with such a one sided deal, they would have crumbled because of rebellion. The informants would have sought out new handlers long, long ago, and that was just business, not friendship.

I want things to change, he hears, like the whisper of a ghost. Her husky voice ricochets inside his head, tired and worn. It's followed by the flashing images of her screaming his name in terror, tossing Naruto away from the attacker, and her wet, bloody body slurring assurances as she bleeds out, trying to comfort others when she is in agony.

His heart clenches inside his chest, because it hurts, it hurts like an old wound made new and dug deeper. She is his friend, and she came for him when he screwed up. When she said she was done, she lied, because she came back, and that means something. *She* means something.

He hates his new memories. He hates that he knows what it's like to finally see her still, to see her body laid out and limp. He hates that she isn't here, right now, smart mouthing and snarking with him, but down below, in a cabin, as cold as the air around her.

Kakashi has lost too many friends already, and he swore he wouldn't lose another, but she's so close. She's right there, and he feels useless, because even though he's a genius, he can't wake her up. He feels as helpless as he did when he took second watch, and he witnessed her ward frantically checking and rechecking her, wiping the blood off her lips and ribs.

He doesn't know if he can come close to how much she's changed things. He doesn't know how far he can make it. Kakashi just knows that he refuses to lose another friend, and that he doesn't have to compromise his loyalty to the village and his loyalty to her.

So when she wakes up (and she will, *she has to*, or he won't be able to-) she'll open her eyes to solid proof that he can do more than he has before. That she isn't alone with her team, fighting against the whole world.

Haku is preparing his surrogate mother for land travel when Team Seven comes into her cabin, the door sliding open with a quiet creak. He takes time to turn towards the newcomers curiously, pausing his preparations on the stretcher to look over at three pairs of eyes. For a moment the three hesitate, as if caught in the middle of doing something bad.

Haku flicks his eyes over to Zabuza, who is perched in his seat with Kubikiribōchō in his grasp. The man seems to be unfazed by their entrance.

"Yes?" Haku asks, turning back to the younger children.

"Uh, well," stammers out the blond. " I was wondering, if I could maybe see Fairy-I mean, Ryuu-nee, and-"

"Let them in," rumbles Zabuza. His low voice obviously startles the three, who were probably unaware of his presence in the room. He is seated somewhat horizontally to the entrance, making it hard to

notice him to any who come in. It's probably why he chose that spot in the first place.

Haku wordlessly waves them in, and the three enter sheepishly, heads bowed, but at least they have a good enough instinct to keep their eyes on the two people in the room and remain moving as a unit. They would be poor shinobi otherwise.

As one they enter, and the blond immediately gravitates toward the prone form of the ashen woman in the bed. His eyes are glued to her, and he seems visibly shaken by her appearance.

Zabuza seems to eye the trio, inspecting them as if he is he is looking for something in particular.

He does not miss the way the boy's tan hand tentatively reaches out to touch her arm, and how it snaps back when it feels her pale skin.

"Cold," he murmurs, and his bottom lip is worried in between his teeth, his free hand curling into a fist.

"That's the blood loss. I healed the punctures in her lungs as best I could, but bones are harder to heal, and I cannot replace the fluids she lost. I used the last emergency IV I had yesterday," Haku states, securing fabric to a metal frame. His brows furrow in anger at himself, because she's not stable, but he can't do anything.

"That's... really amazing," murmurs Sakura, green eyes wide.

"It's not good enough," Haku states bitterly, jerkily tugging a knot ridiculously tight.

Sakura shakes her head, and she turns to the boy with silky hair and fair skin, looking serious. "Without you, she wouldn't be here right now. You were so focused, even though it was chaotic, and we... we did nothing..."

Haku pauses in his task, his hands stilling over the frame of the stretcher. For a moment, he wonders why they would feel the need to do anything at all, but he realizes that they too must feel inadequate.

He turns to face the newcomers, his dark eyes calm. "I don't think we have ever been introduced properly. My name is Haku," he says, his lyrical voice quiet. "That man sitting over there is Zabuza-sama, and I was raised by him and Ryuishi-sama."

"Eh?" Naruto asks, turning away from the woman for a moment to look between Haku and Zabuza, his blue eyes confused.

Sasuke, with his ingrained need to reciprocate manners with manners, tilts his head in greeting. "Uchiha Sasuke," he utters.

Sakura follows, bowing deeply to both Haku and Zabuza, her pink hair flipping with her movements. "Haruno Sakura," she pipes up. "Thank you for taking care of us."

Naruto takes a moment to understand what is happening, but he gets it after a moment, scratching the back of his neck. "Uzumaki Naruto, and Ryu-nee... raised me as well," he admits. His eyes turn back to the lax face of said woman, his emotions displayed openly on his face. It's longing, and affection. Haku is pleased to see it.

"How long?" intones Zabuza. The children turn to look at him, and three of them are silently intimidated by his overwhelming presence and commanding tone.

"How long has she been raising you?" he reiterates.

Naruto takes a moment to think about the question. He looks down at his hands, and moves his fingers, counting the years on them. "Eight? Eight years," he finally answers, looking back up.

The man grunts in understanding, and the children look away.

"Well," Haku states, thinking of his surrogate mother's words. In a better world, they would have been brothers, but in this one they can at least be cousins. Ryuishi-sama would like it if they were friends, at least, he knows her enough to know that.

"Sakura-kun, Naruto-kun, Sasuke-kun, this was your first out-of-village mission, was it not?"

The three genin flush for being so obvious.

Haku hums thoughtfully, looking back to the things that need to be prepared before they hit land. He turns an eye to the others in the room, and he taps his finger restlessly on his arm. What would Ryuishi have said at a time like this?

"You did what you were supposed to," Zabuza grumbles. "Following orders and staying alive were the best options for you, and anything else would have gotten one of you killed."

Silence overtakes the room, and Haku's face grows solemn. If one of them had died, Ryuishi would have carried that weight as her own. She would wear it like a chain around her neck until it dragged her into her grave.

"But we just sat there-" Naruto tries to protest, but the man cuts him short with a fierce look. The blond audibly gulps.

"Thirteen years ago, our team fell apart, and she hasn't stopped blaming herself for that," the gruff man reports stoically.

"Imagine what she would do if a child died when she thought she could have prevented it," Haku finishes. "Imagine how she would carry it."

"It wouldn't be her fault," Sasuke says quietly, after a moment.

"It wouldn't have to be," Zabuza counters.

The team remains silent, absorbing the new information, cataloging it into their heads. The wooden cabin of the boat is crowded, but there was a distance between the people in the room before, where now, a thread strings them together, a ribbon of fate that connects them all, and the source of it lies silent on the lone bunk, covered in blankets but still so cold.

Naruto turns a helpless glance at his older sister, and he sniffs just once.

Sasuke seems to be far out of his depth, trying to justify such an illogical thought process, but Sakura seems to understand without asking further. She simply moves forward, brushing the boy's shoulders, and she stands by Haku, holding her hands out in offering.

"What can I do to help?" she asks. *What can I do to get better?* her eyes say.

Haku smiles down at the girl, placing a roll of gauze in her hands and gesturing towards the packs waiting to be filled. She wordlessly starts to assist.

Sasuke waits a moment before heading towards the swordsman, who roughly kicks a sharpening stone at him without looking. The young boy plops down and withdraws his kunai, beginning to hone them down while Zabuza keeps watch over the room.

Naruto laces his fingers with his nee-san's cold digits for a moment longer. He once promised he would help her find what she lost, but now he thinks that if he can't find it, maybe he can make it for them all.

Ryuishi isn't aware of the journey to the Land of Fire. She isn't there for the awkward understanding between teams, or Haku's fretful worrying over her state as she is carried off the barge, lying listlessly on a stretcher.

She isn't there when Kakashi summons his companions to race ahead with a message, forewarning the village of their coming.

She doesn't get to see a harried Hokage accept the scroll from the pug and smoke thoughtfully from his pipe before ordering an escort for the team to meet them at the gates. Even if she was, she wouldn't be able to read his mind, full of satisfaction that the asset was so fully compromised that she'd risk so much.

Few people are aware of Tenzō's moment of terror when he is informed of the mission parameters. Nobody sees his face fall behind the porcelain mask when the words, *Long-term political asset in critical condition after altercation with unknown enemy in defense of genin team seven*, fall from the Hokage's lips.

If she was awake, she would have probably laughed when said ANBU led a team and descended from the trees around the suspicious Haku, who quite literally stabbed one with a senbon when they tried to examine her without telling him what they were doing.

She would have been very emotional about how Naruto ordered the 'cloaked weirdos' to 'back the fuck up and listen to Haku'.

She would have probably been teary-eyed when the remaining members of the team squared up behind him, as if they could have driven the ANBU off by themselves.

She would have panicked as they were led through the main gates, escorted over the rooftops and business ways, because it was too much. Too many people could see, and what if someone wrong was watching?

Fear would have consumed her as the doctors rushed over her body, jostling others out of the way.

None of this happens.

Instead it is the beaten teams that get to watch on as her limp body is lifted onto a bed, and glowing green hands reach out to touch her before peeling away, as if burned by her chakra.

It is Zabuza that gets to watch them place a respirator over her face and an IV in her veins, whispering about lowered body temperature and delayed capillary response. It is him who bustles Haku to the front, where the boy takes one look at the experienced medics before him and delivers his diagnosis as best he can, hiding his trembling hands in the sleeves of his robe and warning them about the effects of too much exposure to her chakra.

"-blunt force trauma to the head, hard enough to cause swelling, and stress break along ribs four through nine on the left side, three of which punctured the upper section of the lung, causing traumatic pneumothorax and leading to fluid in the airway and asphyxiation. Laceration and minor severing of the femoral led to major blood loss-"

It is Naruto who protests loudly, clinging on to Zabuza's pant leg as a medic tries to peel him away. He who refuses to relent or give up, to let go of the people he's come to know just the littlest bit.

"I won't let them disappear," he growls. "I won't let them separate us, we can get check ups in the same room as her!"

It is Sasuke who sees the logic in this, who acknowledges what can happen to a team left alone in seemingly enemy territory. It's Sasuke who doesn't ignore his cry, who sees one boy holding onto the only family he's ever had, clinging desperately, wanting answers to questions he might not get to ask, and it's him who grabs onto Zabuza as well.

It is Sakura who links the two to her, grasping on to their arms, and looking to their sensei for guidance. Caught between an outsider and her home, she is the one who decides that it's not a question of either or, but of how to go about it.

It is Kakashi who dismisses the medic, him who turns to deal with the security and secrets, already sending off shadow clones to report the situation in person and gain the appropriate security clearances. It's him who keeps a sharp eye out for underhanded play, or treachery against the assembled group that won't break up. Not this one, not this time.

It is Tenzō who looks towards Kakashi and twitches his hand, flicking a sign out so fast few could catch it. *Safe*, it says. Because that's what she will be, he'll make sure of it. He'll make sure the watch shifts around her are comprised of people he trusts, and that the team with her is treated fairly if they behave. Tenzō will take note of her condition when the other man cannot, and he will repay the favor she has done them a thousand times over, seeing that they are fed and clothed and housed.

Safe because his senpai is here, wounded and tired, but alive. Safe because three genin are awake to scream and protest while she remains silent and unmoving, and Tenzō knows she pushes too far. He knows what the likely story is, because she was cold and delirious with them once already, pushing for a world she built.

And though she is not awake to see it, or to direct it, the Rakki Ryuu causes ripples that shake the world.

In Kirigakure, an old dictator with the face of a child falls before the might of an army that sweeps through the land like the oncoming tide. His body burns to a crisp, entombed in igneous rock and laid to rest by poisonous mist.

Terumī Mei wears the Mizukage's robes, and she stands tall above the world.

"I did not do this alone," she proclaims at her inauguration. "And I will not stop now. For too long, the Land of Water has stood stagnant, caught in a system of oppression. For too long, we have held down others, instead of building the world up."

She breathes in, and she feels confidence fill her heart. Of promises she made, and plans laid out.

"I stand here, your Mizukage, the strongest of the shinobi in this village, and I say enough. I am not here to keep you crushed beneath my heel, to work you till death, and use you, your children, and your children's children to further my own might.

"This land is ours, and it is our might I will spread. It is your voices I will hear, and your works I will promote. The sea will bring us life, and the water will keep us home. We will rise from this and strike the world unseen. Kirigakure will no longer be one teammate standing on the body of another, or one student over a corpse. It will be people standing together, because one droplet is nothing alone, but a river can carve the earth itself.

"I have seen a path for us, and it lies in acknowledging strength and skill. The strength it takes to sail the seas and harvest from the ocean, and the skill it takes to craft something where there was once nothing. It is the skill that slices through an enemy, and the strength it takes to keep going when there is nothing but cold and dread.

"Our strength will be in our people, and our people will be our strength. If you think I am wrong, if you think it is weak, if you think that bloodlust and mercilessness are the paths we must take..."

She breathes in, focusing on the crowds. Her eyes seem to glow against the mist, the vibrant color of her standing out in a world of gray. "Then know I walked that path for all my life, and I didn't make it here by looks alone. If you think killing me is the path, then *I invite you to try*."

She lets her chakra soar out of her body, and the people hold their breath. This is power they know, the kind that crushes and destroys. It is massive and skilled, and she is not an opponent to take lightly, to dismiss, to even face.

Yet she speaks of a new order, where she does not take and demand more, but where she directs and moves forward. Not stagnant control, clenched tight in a fist, but a unity led by one who has the strength to direct it.

"Godaime!" shouts one man, and the cry catches like fire.

"GODAIME!" they scream, for the first of its kind.

The first female Kage in the history of the nations. The first leader to gain her support from the bottom, to reach out and feed and clothe her own before moving on to gaining more. The first one to take them into consideration so openly, the first to blend the old ways and the new under the light of the law, with the blessing of the Water Daimyo.

Mei looks out over the city, and she feels a stirring in her chest. She has made it farther than she ever believed she could, and she stands at the pinnacle of where she thought humanity could go. She will strive to stand by her words, to make Kirigakure into a nation both feared and respected, acknowledged for its strength and its progress.

Her mind flashes with the image of slanted, dark eyes, empty and forever. She thinks of a husky voice, and fortunes' worth of supplies over the years, saving lives and changing minds. She thinks of a jump start that all started with one woman who looked past the tragedies life had delivered her, and held out a hand to the land that once beat her down.

Terumī Mei, Fifth Mizukage and leader of a successful revolution, has incurred a debt, one she feels no regret for. She will pay the Lucky Dragon back for the gifts it has delivered, and she will see to it that she honors her word and reinstates the swordsman by her side.

This is how the game is played, she recalls. Forward, not back.

In Otogakure, Senju Tsunade stares outside her window and wonders when, exactly, she let things get this out of hand.

A series of damning files sits off to her left, settled nicely on the nightstand, innocuous-looking, but containing information that shakes her more than the casual reappearance of her old teammate.

She knows Orochimaru. She knows he's conniving and vicious, as cold and cunning as the snakes he uses. She knows that he did not share the information with her out of the goodness of his heart, and that when she left the village, left *them*, she knew she was never going to be forgiven by the pale boy that had been her best friend.

Then again, maybe she never knew him at all, because she's looking out into the village he created, and it's nothing like the sterile, heartless place she imagined.

It is efficient like she thought, but there is heart here she did not see before. Things she thought he would ignore are openly displayed, and ideas no other nation thought of are in place.

A school for anybody willing to attend was the start, where people could gather to learn and teach. A blacksmith's son no longer needed to be a blacksmith, and a farmer had no need to remain illiterate. Businesses could exchange ideas, and trade could be taught to those who sought the information. Great discussions took place in auditoriums, debates over the best way to solve a particular problem, or the essence of human nature itself.

The school drew people, and the people drew business. Food stalls cropped outside, and then clothing, and then trinkets, and grocers, and apparel, fabrics and glasses and goods she had never seen before. Residences were still being built, and the roads were paved with stone for ease of movement. There was running water and lights, and hotels and bars and everything she could have ever thought.

There was culture here. Slang words native to the city itself, along with distinctive art styles and stories. There was production, writing that put Jiraiya's to shame, and an industry based on the stomach of the world. The Land of Rice flourished, and the people were not crushed into order. Instead, the variables were arranged so that the natural chaos of human nature fed back into itself. Otogakure was more than she could have believed could be made within the span of half a century, let alone little over a decade.

Imagine, she thinks, what he could have done with Konoha.

The thought draws her back to the files resting by her bed, and she clenches her fist. Konoha, that took Dan and Nawaki. The Hokage's position that she loathed-the teacher she thought she could trust.

Her heart hangs heavy in her chest, and guilt gnaws at her. The Uchiha massacre, all staged, with her teacher knowing the outcome. The infiltration of Ame, and the breakdown of negotiations that had a suspicious amount of evidence pointing towards Konoha. The Fourth Hokage and his wife, their sacrifice and wishes gone ignored. The jinchuuriki, their son, ostracized and demonized. The older council corrupted, money gone missing, assets conveniently lost, the sheer number of holes within the security, and most of all, the betrayal of his own student.

" You experimented on infants!" she had screamed, drunk and enraged at his accusations.

" I followed orders," he replied, as cold as ice and as cutting as a blade.

It was truth.

She shakes her head, but the thoughts linger. He didn't just plant a seed of doubt in her mind, he raised a forest. It wasn't just the files, it was the sources, the way he acted, sure and knowing, the way he proved himself empirically beyond a shadow of a doubt.

" Why?" she begged. Why her? Why now? Why not when it all began?

" You left, and I was alone," he answered ruthlessly. "Who would you have believed if the evidence wasn't forced upon you? If there was room for you to doubt?"

Another sin on her shoulders, another burden to bear. When he needed his team most, anybody at all, nobody was there. When the world came crashing down, and he struggled with morality and loyalty and the meaning of it all, there was no one to remind him he was human, that he existed beyond following orders and taking lives.

" I was going to kill him, to burn Konohagakure to the ground and invade, but I was led to the realization it would be wasteful. My quarrel isn't with the people inside, it's with the man who raised me to be a leader, who gave me a dream before stealing it away. It's for the teacher who never failed to see the worst in me, who would use me as a weapon and a scapegoat, but would not recognize me as anything other than a tool to be thrown away."

The way he had said it, dispassionately and detached, as if it was old news. As if he had accepted long ago that is exactly what he was, a tool with no worth other than what he could provide-

She thinks of crimson painting her world, and everyone she's failed. She thinks of a curse lingering in her mind, a fear that shakes her bone-deep. A phobia of the very thing that keeps her alive.

" It's called exposure therapy. It's an idea that was lended to me. Starting with photographs, then video, and onward as such. Controlled environments, gradual evolution," he had rasped, and then he smiled. "If nothing else, Sound has a thriving gambling street."

She stares over the city, with children laughing and adults eagerly discussing something in the soba stall below. An elderly couple

strolls down the lane, stopping to greet a patrolling jōnin in a way she's never seen ninja and civilians interact before.

Senju Tsunade looks out, and she decides that if the one who was supposed to be the worst of them can grow past his wounds far enough to make this, than she can take a step forward as well.

"Shizune, get ready. An old friend extended me an invitation an upcoming event, and I want to see if it's still open," she announces, startling her meditating apprentice.

She has a teacher to confront.

AN: Here I am with my ninja clan... jk, but no, Ryuishi has not been dicking around. Serious changes. Serious fucking changes. Also, Kakashi realizing he was a complete and total as, determined to do better, Zabuza now waiting in a role reversal. Team seven adjusting to word views shifting, setting new goals, and glued together because trauma is a unifying burden. Keep an eye on that Naruto kid, he's a real crazy kid, and Sakura is tricky.

I thank lurkers, favoriters, and followers. I especially thank reviewers who keep me so driven, because your words fill me up with encouragement, and when I feel down, you guys can lift me up.

I give a super shout out to Enbi, my beta, whose faithfulness to this fic is amazing, and who should be hugged firmly for at least thirty seconds each day.

Question: Taking into account how important small details are in this fic, and the ripple effects, what do you think Kakashi will find when he starts putting together Ryuishi's old riddle? OR How do you think that Kabuto kid is doing these days?

In Which Disorder Begins

I do not own Naruto.

Orochimaru is, in a word, satisfied.

He is pleased with the way things are going, and how the pieces are beginning to come together, bit by bit. It's the culmination of several years of work, and knowing that things are going smoothly gives him a deep sense of tranquility. He can feel the looseness in his limbs, and the coiled strength in his bones that comes from gratification. He wears the robes of the Otokage, freely and proudly, and none can tear them from him. He walks invited back into the land he grew up in, and vengeance is on the horizon.

Behind the veil covering the lower half of his face, he smiles. He is glad Ryuishi requested he reconsider his motivations. While the utter and complete destruction of his one time home and the annihilation of his old teacher would give him immense gratification, it would not come without consequence or price.

People would be keen to disbelieve his motives in the future, and cast disparaging and distrusting eyes toward his village. His name would become a stigma, and no matter what situation he was in, the world be quick to cast him as the villain.

His smile turns bitter as he realizes that these were not consequences, but truths he had dealt with his whole life. Truths he will continue to deal with.

His good mood shines through though, because even with those working against him, he has built a legacy. He has begun to change the world, and grows more knowledgeable everyday. He understands more and more as his science progresses. People come from every country to hear his lectures at the college, and he

is peerless in the scientific community. They clamor for his bits of knowledge, and they covet his thoughts.

War would be a waste of manpower and resources, that much is true. There would be little logic in destroying Konoha as a whole. While he is resentful of the population for being so quick to cast him out, and for the lifetime of mistrustful behavior and ostracization, he understands on a logical level that his reasoning can be sterile.

A stone cold killer, Ryuishi once said. He doesn't quite understand the rhetoric behind the wording, but once explained, the sentiment behind it was inarguable.

Studying the mind led him to the understanding that there was a substantial difference between his reasoning and others. There was an element to things others took into consideration, a deep personal attachment, or an emotional tone. It was always there for them, clouding things up, muddying their views and lives. Of course, more data needed to be collected in a controlled environment to prove things much further, as there were a truly astounding number of variables involved in the human psyche. Truly, this was baseless speculation, and while entertaining, it was entirely useless.

His golden eyes flicker around his surroundings, and once more he feels satisfied with himself. The trees are thick and tall, and the foliage is dense. The air smells of old growth forest and earth, and it is a nostalgic scent for him.

Orochimaru walks in the Land of Fire, and he walks as a free man who has paid for his crimes in the most literal sense.

Reparations were made for his transgressions, and his crimes were atoned for, one wagonload of goods at a time. His last four years have been spent preparing for this day, clearing his name and making his case in the noble courts.

The daimyo are simple people who have led privileged lives, unaccustomed to change, and demanding of respect they have not

earned. Orochimaru does not believe they are divinely inspired, sharing the blood of the gods. He does not believe that they are even the most qualified to lead, but for now, it remains that they own the lands.

With the Rice daimyo under his sway, he has been able to negotiate non-aggression pacts through a proxy with the Land of Wind and the Land of Fire. The pacts allow for small scale ninja activity, but disallow acts of war. Acts of war include decimating a large number of the population, unpaid for collateral damage of ten digit amounts, or actions resulting in the death of a Kage.

As such, Orochimaru is safe. Especially since he was invited to the Chuunin Exams that were taking place, a formality that few Kage actually participate in. Most simply sent their teams to be examined, but Orochimaru has plans.

His eyes flick to Tsunade by his side, her face determined and angry.

Yes, plans. Perhaps he cannot engage his old teacher, but death is not the only revenge Orochimaru can deliver.

For someone as sickeningly duplicitous and sentimental as that old fool, nothing will do so much damage as what he has planned, and nothing will gain Orochimaru as much either. Already he feels gratification from it, simply enjoying the anger he can feel rolling off of his old teammate in waves. Her initial horror and disbelief still makes him want to laugh, something obnoxious and manic bubbling up in his chest when he thinks of the faces she made.

It was disgustingly emotional, but worth the toil he went through. Worth the effort of collecting file reports and evidence, worth the years of infiltration and fragments he picked up, the pieces he gathered to make his case.

He was viciously pleased at her negative slide, and bitterly glad at her acceptance of his invitation to come along. Her sense of

righteousness would not allow her to let him face their sensei alone, nor would it allow her to abandon him until the task was complete.

Still, there is a disquiet inside him. It is... strange, after all that has between them, to be together again. An absence, or a hollow that has been filled. He attempts not to look at it too hard, to bury it deep beneath his schemes, but the small part of him that is still emotional pulses with warmth.

At least, it does until the tattoo around his wrist flares with sensation. The seal on him writhes, and he holds out his hand in expectation. It is an emergency link, and only two people can use it. One of them doesn't even realize she activates it at all.

The team around him pauses as he does, and Tsunade casts her eyes at him as well. There is a flash of smoke, and when it clears, a sidewinder coils around his arm, a scroll in its mouth.

Orochimaru narrows his eyes. Kabuto, then.

He pries the scroll from its jaws before dismissing the summon, who stares balefully for a moment, as if expecting a reward for *doing its job* (Ryuishi spoils them, he thinks disdainfully) before it disappears.

"Trouble, Orochimaru?" Tsunade asks.

"New information," he corrects, breaking the wax seal on the document and unrolling it. His eyes flick across the carefully coded characters, and his mood rapidly sinks into distaste. Kabuto should be more than skilled enough to heal the injuries in time, but even if he does, she will be hampered for an extended period of time, her performance hindered while she mends.

He lets out a displeased noise. Well, it's not exactly how he planned, but she has her place in this as well.

"It would seem you may meet the co-founder of Otogakure sooner than anticipated," he rasps, crumpling the paper in his hands and

idly setting it aflame.

"Oh?" Tsunade looks at him curiously. "I thought you said something about only revealing their identity in 'promising circumstances'."

Orochimaru continues walking, this time at a quicker pace than before. The team around him stands straighter, more on guard, picking up on his irritation.

"It seems even the best can be compromised," he drawls.

Inside, he snarls. The Akatsuki found her quicker than he anticipated, even with all the effort he put into obscuring her whereabouts and identity. It bodes nothing well that those brats are still alive to annoy him even after he's put so much effort into extinguishing every foothold they have seized outside of Ame.

Something fierce burns inside of him, made of bitter poison and molten rage. How dare they. *How dare they touch what belongs to him.*

Kakashi sits inside a darkened hospital room, frustrated.

On the bed, Ryuishi lies hooked up to several machines, her body still beneath layers of thick blankets. She doesn't sigh or kick like she does when she is asleep, she simply exists, eyes closed and spirit drained. The mask over her face occasionally fogs up with a weak breath.

Beside her bed, Zabuza sits attentively, his back pressed against the wall, his eyes scanning the room. His greatsword sits across his lap, because he refused to be parted from it, or Ryuishi and Haku. No talking or threats could change his mind.

"How many ciphers did she use?" Kakashi breathes quietly to himself, sorting out another file to the side. What looks like a hastily

erased scratch on the page gives it away. That scratch is on twenty four other files, in the same exact spot, in the same ink.

It turns out that sorting the clues Ryuishi had given to him over the years was infinitely harder than originally planned. Not only did he have to request copies of dangerous and sensitive information, but he had to keep it secure while also dealing with the fallout of the River Mission.

Naruto was relentless when they came back. The whole team was, actually, and Kakashi could not blame them. He shared the feeling of weakness and uselessness, and he was determined to make up for his prior lackadaisical training schedule. Unfortunately, he also had vowed to pick up the slack the comatose woman had left behind, and make good on the help she asked for.

He knew he could do both, and Team Seven was making remarkable progress.

After three days of nonstop bedside vigilance, they had relented to leaving her side only because Kakashi promised her safety. Even then, Naruto had demanded the right to visit at random, so that at any moment he could drop by to ensure his sister and her family had not been spirited away.

His team was driven. Sakura was leading the pack in chakra control, and he had a sneaking suspicion that she was attempting to mimic some of the forms the young Haku had shown. Physical conditioning was headed by the very determined Naruto, who was training hard enough to earn him an honorary green jumpsuit. He was tireless as he strained onward, wearing the soles out of his sandals and tearing the seams of his clothes as he struggled. What little ninjutsu tricks Kakashi had begun showing them had been lapped up by Sasuke, who eagerly buckled down and remained attentive during these new lessons. He was captivated and disciplined when Kakashi performed a practical demonstration on the differences between Yin and Yang Chakras.

However, the lessons he had to teach them when they drilled did not go nearly as well. The Academy had done the young students no favors when it came to battlefield strategy and terrain usage. The hypothetical situations he came up were supposed to be easy to solve, and had real life application, but the answers they gave...

Naruto's answer, more often than not, was a straightforward approach with adjustments made on the fly. He led by action, and his communication skills were lacking, which was ironic considering who raised him.

Sakura's was a clinically methodical setup that, while feasible, allowed no room for human error. It was cold and detached, and perhaps more than a little unsettling, if still technically correct.

Sasuke seemed to forget that the people in the hypotheticals were, in fact, supposed to represent actual people. His losses were always heavy.

He shakes his head yet again, looking over to where Haku is glaring at him, shuffling through the woman's charts for the tenth time. How did Ryuishi and Zabuza get him to turn out so functional? So level?

He rakes his hand through his hair, turning back to the files. He wonders a lot of things about Ryuishi. How did she find time to do everything she had been? He's exhausted after training a genin team, providing evasive answers to the Hokage, checking Naruto's apartment, finding an empty Okiya, and attempting to decipher her files. How did she even begin to juggle as much as she had been?

He rearranges the stack in his hand, concentrating on several things at once. It's only been fifteen days and he's ready to throw in the towel. He's bone tired, and at night he collapses, falling asleep with cognitive bias theories, yearly estimated incomes, and rogue criminal data running through his head. It's blurring into one big tangled mess, and he begins to wonder if this was how she felt all the time.

Sleepily, he places two of the scratched pages together, connecting the lines. Placed like this, it sort of looks like they were meant to be together, but they came separately, almost two years apart.

Kakashi squints at the pages, and carefully connects another scratch.

It fits.

Half running on instinct and fumes, he looks at the stack around his, and he picks out the lines. This time he ignores all common sense, because isn't that what she would do? Dates of arrival, categories of information, village ties, and character profiles, he ignores them all. He picks out words hidden inside paragraphs, linked together through a code, and he puts all this priceless information on the floor, arranging it like a mosaic.

Inside the back of his head, he laments trying to go at it like any usual person would. Of course there was no key to tie it all together. Of course she wouldn't use numbers and letter pages-she hates math. No, she wouldn't put things together in a sensible, easily comprehensible order in regards to borders or rank, she always ignores them anyway.

He hunches over, snatching up random pages from equally random piles, only marked by scratches and doodles. Lines connecting over pictures and incomes and people.

Zabuza watches in vague amusement as it begins to come together, one big picture made from little tiny details, obscured by time and content.

Eventually, after hours of digging, a picture lies on the ground, with a few spare words. The drawing of a cloud, like the ones on their attackers cloaks. It's almost nonsensical, but Kakashi sees the random files connect, clicking together, and it makes sense in a way he couldn't see before.

The file of the Yugakure missing-nin, the corner creating the curve of a cloud, linked with reports of particularly violent homicides and strange ruins left at the sights of murders in Suna and Kumo. The Suna puppeteer placed with the missing corpse of the previous Kazekage, and a terrorist bomber from Iwa attached by a curving line to the destruction of outposts in Ishi and a dam in Taki.

Stolen scrolls, missing caravans, goods re-allocated, inconsistencies in information, little tidbits written in black and white. Photographs of suspected traitors from all countries, and bounties from all across the continent.

Four years of random nonsense tied together by one exceptionally mediocre doodle, Kakashi thinks hysterically to himself. He blinks exhaustedly.

He stares at it, and it stares back. At the tail end of the cloud, several pages come together and display her sloppy handwriting.

Daimyo over Kage, terrorists over Daimyo.

"Ah," he states to the silent room.

Wearily, he crouches down, burning the image into his head. This is... this is *big* . This is internationally big. This is world-endingly big. He actually doesn't quite yet understand how big, but he's beginning to get an inkling.

"Variables," intones the swordsman suddenly, his eyes resting on the jounin.

Kakashi turns towards him, his eye lazy. If they would just talk, they could probably break this secret wide open, but they hold their silence. He supposes it makes sense, because they wouldn't know which secret she was attempting to give away.

"What?"

"She said variables were like puzzle pieces. She hated them, because if she didn't account for them all, she couldn't complete the puzzle," Zabuza states.

"I'm guessing that this is only a single piece," Kakashi drawls tiredly.

"Don't worry," Haku assures him, tucking the blankets around Ryuishi, checking her vitals. "At least now you realize that there's a puzzle in the first place. She even gave you pieces to start with."

Kakashi rakes his hands through his hair once more. Even with the few pieces he has now, he doesn't like the picture that is beginning to take shape.

"Are they all this bad?" he asks, not really expecting an answer.

Zabuza simply eyes the unconscious form of the woman for a few moments. It seems like he's mulling something over inside his head, a thought that won't leave him alone.

"One of them gave her that scar on her neck because they didn't like what she said," the man finally admits, and Kakashi hears the sharp intake of air from Haku.

Kakashi turns his eyes away from the piece he just collected, the scattered papers on the floor. His lone grey eye meets with Zabuza's, and he takes the quiet hint for what it was meant to be.

A dangerous piece is missing, one that threatened everybody equally. One that had the ability to hold her after torture, one that her teammate dislikes, if his tone and demeanor is anything to go by.

I am not unwatched, she had told him.

His insides churn, and even exhausted he can feel a palpable anger well inside him, a fierce defensiveness. How many fronts was she fighting at once? How often did she lose those fights to the point where yet another person carved themselves into her flesh?

Guilt weighs down on him suddenly, because he was one of those fights. He had marked her hands, had placed the faintest of scars on them, electricity lines burned into flesh forever. Like the scar on her back given to her by the swordsman, it was fainter over time, but it still existed.

I'm sorry, he wants to say. It's never easy, and everything is so complex. He struggles to grasp at it, all these minute details and overarching plans she has been weaving for years while ignoring the abuse she has taken to see them succeed.

He feels like he's going mad, because there are no lines anymore. There is only shades, in all the colors one could imagine. Minute differences in word patterns or tones that shouldn't matter, but do. Little clues spread out beyond what one person should be capable of.

"How many pieces until the puzzle is complete?"

This time, it's Haku who answers, his fingers gently brushing across Ryuishi's face for a moment. In the dark room, his eyes seem luminous in a way hers never were, reflecting light instead of absorbing it.

"The puzzle is never complete, it's passed on so that the next person has more pieces than you did when you began," he says.

"That's how the game is played," Kakashi says, realization beginning to dawn on him. "Forward, not back."

Haku nods, and another slot is filled in Kakashi's mind. She was prepared to fight alone, to take the damage alone, but the tools and strength she gained were shared. The people she shared them with might not even know it, but she was meticulous in her planning.

Everyone and everything is a puzzle piece in a three dimensional picture, he thinks tiredly. And somehow, everything connects. He's

just beginning to fit the ones together that she has, and he's fairly certain they both are missing some variables.

The brain isn't entirely active when in a coma. But it's not entirely inactive, either. Technically speaking, maintaining homeostasis requires neural impulses, and things like breathing, heartbeat, peristalsis, and blood circulation are all linked back to the central nervous system, and therefore require brain function.

Still, it should be said that being in a coma and being asleep are two different beasts. One doesn't dream, per-say, and one doesn't live in reality. A coma is a grey area, somewhere hovering between life and death. It's unconsciousness, and it's pretty fucking weird in medical terms.

Which is fine. Ryuishi's really used to grey areas by now.

Still, it's pretty weird to be existing somewhere without a body, in some sort of metaphysical plane of existence. She's not sure if she's a soul, or *what*. Shit is downright strange at the moment, if time even has any meaning here.

(If 'here' is actually functionally within some sort of definable reality.)

How do you describe senses that don't exist in a physical sense? Because man, she can't see, smell, hear, feel, taste, or smell, but she is acquiring information about the environment around her like crazy. Absorbing it like a fucking sponge absorbs liquid.

Which means she has some sort of thought process? Or at least implies such, right? So, something loosely resembling human consciousness as she knows it, but also not at all.

Fuck, it's hard to say. It's like the Void, but not the Void. Like breathing without lungs, or hearing when there is no sound. It's impressions and shit.

In fact, she's getting the impression now that she's screaming. It feels *great* .

Just that release, the raw force of exertion emptying itself into the world around her, fluctuation and vibration forever. She doesn't have a throat to feel raw and achy, or lungs to run out of air. She doesn't have a fucking body in the first place, she just has the loose idea that accompanies a good, solid scream. The satisfaction of emptying herself out, of letting her internal conflict be converted directly into noise, of the world shaking and vibrating with the force of her 'screaming.' It's pressure being released, and everything streaming out over the entire universe, shaking the foundations of reality itself, her mental struggles and emotions spilling all over the metaphysical cosmos.

Ryuishi's really not sure how long she just screams without a body or sound. She's not really sure of time itself, because there are no clocks, no turning of the sun and moon, and no fucking eyes to see that shit with. There is just the concept of her, all of her, all the little hers running around frantically, trying to salvage something that's atomizing in the background. There's all her pieces and parts, and every one of them just sort of bellows while the Void tries to creep over her, to tangle her up, but they all cling.

They cling to the little ember that first brought them here, her memories and experiences that she refused to give up, the essence of her soul and human self. They cling to the to the world that built itself around the ember, comprised of new memories and sensations, bonds made and built, hardships and struggles she lived through, and loved ones she cherishes.

The Void advances, hungry and patient and empty forever. An abyss waiting to claim them, to take them over the moment they decide to give up.

The thing is, Ryuishi has a lot to scream about, something to cling to, down to the littlest fractured piece of her psyche.

She screams out her pain, the agony searing through a body she can't quite wake up. The torture she usually ignores or doesn't notice, it's personified here, a mangled version of her, torn to pieces that ooze and bleed and hurt. It sound like gurgling on blood and choking on tears because everything is sharp and stabbing and **pain** .

She screams out her joy, because they were safe, safe, she won and that asshole with a face like hers lost. The victory that tastes so rich on her tongue, it sounds like trumpets and parades, because fuck those guys, the ones that were hers were alive.

She screams out all of her emotions, twisted and conflicted. Each one gains a new voice, and a chaotic harmony arises from it. The constant fear she feels, for the safety of the people she loves, for the mistakes she knows she's bound to make, for the danger she will always be in. Inadequacy that gnaws at her heart, because she knows she'll never be quite good enough, smart enough, strong enough. Guilt hangs around her neck, because oh, the mistakes she has made and the sins she has committed, their ghosts will always haunt her. Anxiety in her stomach joins in, because *whatifwhatifwhatif* will always sound inside her skull, a thousand paths and a thousand choices every single day.

Joy sings in her heart for all the little things, like the color of the leaves and the water on her skin, and the delirious happiness she has laughing with Zabuza, hugging Haku, holding Naruto's hand, kissing Gaara's forehead, spending time with Kakashi, or remembering Kisame. Pride swells in her chest for how far she's come, the people she has met, things she has changed, the way the Mumei have developed, the endless capacity of humankind itself to grow.

Sorrow overflows her temples and chest, because she misses so much; her family, her commander, the peace she used to have, the ignorance she used to hold and she's lost too much, fought so hard, and it's never going to end. Anger in her fists and teeth, because she's never going to be good enough, fuck you this isn't her

responsibility, so what if she fucked up, eat her dick, everybody fucks up. Rage flooding through her body because she's always watching her step, always holding her tongue, always trying to be the best she can be and *it's never good enough* . Shame chokes her because she should have never done that, never killed, made a line and never crossed it, never ever.

Compassion, empathy, bewilderment, mirth, confusion, surprise, melancholy, rage, dejection, desolation, apathy, relaxation, cheer, bored, tired, fury, hope, love, and everything a person can feel, they all make her, and they all scream.

The abyss accepts it, and it remains at bay, waiting for her body to give up, for her soul to give in.

She refuses, because even though she's cold and she hurts, she feels warmth somewhere outside of herself, waiting for her. Ryuishi has been stuck waiting before, and she's going to come back to them.

Hot *damn* is she going to come back.

She fights inside herself, and the monster inside her head howls as she moves inside the metaphysical landscape. Like a fucking army, the pieces of her gather together, shouting, and they move. Water splashes inside her soul, and she gathers a thousand impressions as she picks herself up and grits her nonexistent teeth.

For a moment, she breathes in, and that distant agony floods through her, makes her cry out. She doesn't want to hurt, and the pain makes her lose her hold.

The voices quiet, and for a moment they are pulled back, closer to the void than they have ever gone.

But Ryuishi is used to messing up and slipping backward. Like a wave, she turns it around, swirls the slip backward and makes it rise high up. More and more parts gather and they shove forward. She is

the tireless current that wears away at the stone, she is the wave that crashes against the cliff side and turns it into sand, and *she refuses to die* .

The agony holds her back, but then she feels it again, that warmth beckoning her home. She feels it scorch her being, and she fights against the pain and the Void. She clings to that warmth and she rises higher, reaching out to cradle it. Then the warmth is joined by others. Like candles in the darkness, they flicker to life. They guide her towards the hurt, but she doesn't care. For that warmth, for those flames, she would do anything.

The shrieking chorus reaches a crescendo, and she harmonizes with something. The Void inside her soul turns away from her, and it mingles with the new energy, dark and malignant, vibrant and electric. It's familiar, like weapons oil and ozone, and she clings to it as she leaves the metaphysical world behind.

Slowly, Ryuishi registers a light from behind her lids, and she settles into her body. In the distance, machines flip right the fuck out, and voices sound.

"-waking up, get away-"

"Move now, or I swear I'll kill you myself-"

Ryuishi feels like a battered piece of diarrhea, to be honest. Her mouth is dryer than a Suna drought, and maybe like she swallowed her own hair. Her throat feels itchy, and her lids are heavy as fuck.

She tries to shift and roll over to hide from the world, and she feels the telltale tug of a catheter inside her, which is not so great. She also becomes aware of a gentle, rhythmic puffing on her face, and a mask.

Probably over all those things though, she feels absolute agony sing through her side, and a wheeze in her chest when she breathes. She

becomes very aware of how very much she hurts, and she keens in her throat as she flutters her eyes open.

"Shit," she rasps. Her voice sounds terrible, all guttural and husky.

Light sears her pupils, and she winces, but she realizes that makes her head hurt more. The world swims around her, and she becomes aware of a hand in both of hers.

Scratch that, make that hands all over her, clutching at her like she's going to fall. She feels the familiar pulse of medical ninjutsu around her temples, soothing the pressure, and she smells the sharp tang of disinfectant that tells her she's in a hospital, nevermind that she hasn't been in a proper hospital since she was in Kiri.

She tries to mumble something again, but her dry as fuck mouth stops her, and she blinks, trying to focus on something. She feels the mask on her face move, and something wet and spongy is shoved past her lips.

Ryuishi sucks on it greedily for a moment before she realizes it is, indeed, a wet sponge, but then she continues because she doesn't give a fuck. The moisture helps her throat and mouth find some sort of sense of normality as more light is shined in her eyes.

"Dilation is normal, as is tracking. Chakra pathways are flowing normally, and all her vitals are in range now, save for her low blood pressure, but that seems to be a long standing condition-"

She knows that voice. That's the voice of her fluffy haired little kōhai, but he's in Konoha right now, no way he...

Ryuishi blinks, then blinks again. Her vision clears enough to show multiple people around her bed, but bafflingly enough, Kabuto leaning over her, smiling a genial smile.

"How are you feeling?" he asks placidly, and she knows he's a sneaky bastard, but damn does he sell that concerned medic shit.

Carefully, Ryuishi pushes the sponge he is holding out of her mouth with her tongue, registering the hand he is holding to her temple, tapping code out into her skin. It's far too early for this shit. Actually, what time is it?

"Balls," she answers him, and he pulls his hand away, knowing she has received the message.

Almost immediately, Haku is on her, picking up where Kabuto left off, mindful of her wounds and hurts. "How's your breathing? Still a little fluid left in your lungs, but they're mostly drained. It'll take a while until you regain full functionality, and your oxygen is a little low, so-"

Ryuishi doesn't catch half of what the boy is saying, but she can read him like a book, even if she is disoriented and in pain. There is guilt in his eyes that doesn't belong there, and the vestiges of fear.

"Haku," she wheezes, and the boy flinches at the sound. He looks like he expects her to disown him.

"Thank you for saving my life," she whispers, and the teenager crumples in on himself, his face scrunching up, tears springing in the corner of his eyes.

"You wouldn't wake up," he blubbers, and Ryuishi lets him tuck his head into her neck, kissing him on the crown of his head and letting him hide his face against her. It was probably terrifying for him to go through that, and it's the closest to losing one of them she ever wants him to get.

For a second she feels guilty, but she brushes it aside. She would die a thousand times to keep them alive, and she doesn't regret what she did. Haku may be a bit traumatized-hell, all of the kids might be a bit traumatized now-but the fact remains that they are all alive to experience such things.

She feels a hand bump hers, and when she follows the limb up, Zabuza is glaring down at her.

"Idiot," he declares, and Ryuishi can't help a weak smile. He never did like her plans, but here he is, by her side as she wakes up. He must have been pretty peeved as well, because he knows this is exactly the stunt she would pull, and yet here he remains.

Something inside of her melts at the thought, and she must be drugged, because she can feel her heart damn near burst with affection for the two of them.

"It worked," she states, trying to swallow past the sudden lump in her throat. Sorta. She didn't actually expect to wake up in a hospital. If anything, she was thinking they'd drag her sorry ass back to Orochimaru. She might have deeply underestimated their dislike of the man.

"Where are we?" she asks, and Zabuza quirks an eyebrow at her, his head turning to the other side of the room. She follows his gaze stiffly, trying to move past how much she hurts.

The world blurs, and for a moment she almost vomits, but there isn't anything to throw up. The contraction of her muscles makes her whole body sing in anguish, and she forgets how to breath.

There is the sharp smell of ozone, and gentle hands around her head again.

"Careful," a familiar voice drawls. "You took a very good hit to the head."

She damn well knows she did. Hidan knocked the shit out of her with the butt of his scythe when she tore at his arm. It was all bubbles and blood while he screamed underwater, and things got fairly fuzzy after that.

"Hatake?" she grunts, trying to focus. Her train of thought continues, and she can't tell if it's a sinking feeling or a rising hope that sits inside her chest. Maybe it's just the tube she's breathing out of. "Konoha?" she inquires, bewildered. She can feel her heart rate pick

up, and the monitors around her echo that. The beeping increases in speed, and it's annoying.

"Those who abandon their friends are trash," he says quietly. She blinks as his face comes into view, and the famous line rings in her ears.

"Are we friends?" she asks sluggishly.

Ryuishi is scared that's she's in Konoha, trapped, but more than that, that Zabuza and Haku are trapped with her. She's just waking up and already she has so many thoughts going on, and her head hurts and the word is spinning. Trying to think is like swimming through syrup.

Kakashi looks down and he sees her dark eyes, sleep-heavy and tired. He hears the warning sounds of the machines like alarms, and he can't help but choke on the words he has.

I don't deserve a friend like you, he wants to say. I don't deserve somebody who kept coming back, who worked as hard as you do with nothing in return. I don't deserve homecooked meals, laughter at night, or gentle songs in my home, but I want them.

You're important, and I'm compromised. I care, and when you came back I knew I was wrong. I was terrified when you were bleeding out on that barge, and I couldn't stand it if you hadn't pulled through. I have had nightmares about your scream every time I close my eyes.

You work hard, and you fight for everything you have. You struggle, and you manage more than most people could with three lifetimes, and you still think it's not good enough. You bury your hurt and your pain, and you seek out some sort of redemption that I don't think you need.

I did you wrong, and sorry isn't enough. I will work until you see it, until I can prove that I am willing to give at least a tenth of what you have.

He's never been good with words or emotions though. He's not really good at having friends, or keeping them. So what he ends up saying is a lot less than what he's thinking.

"I'll prove it to you," he tells her.

For a moment he holds his breath, but that sly smirk of her works itself on to her face. She brushes her fingers against his hand where it dangles by the bed, and something in his chest loosens.

"About damn time," she croaks.

It really, really is. For so long, she's justified hanging out with him because she likes it, because he was safe when she was alone, and he was dependable when there was madness. It was ordinary to be used, to feed him information and joke around. It was familiar and routine when there wasn't anything in her life like that.

Yet, the years passed and she was tired of going through a charade. She wanted to cross that line, to actually be friends rather than business partners, and if he can prove it, she's a hundred percent ready. He's already done a fairly good job, what with Zabuza and Haku still beside her and not locked away in some interrogation cell.

"The kids," she says, her mind drifting a bit. "Zabuza was bleeding, and your arm..."

"You were in a *coma*," Zabuza impresses on her. She is still heavily injured, and she's fretting over little things again. She could have *died* .

"The children are fine," reassures Kakashi. "Momochi-san dislocated his arm, and it was cracked in several places, along with a concussion. My wrist was shattered. Young Haku addressed the issues as best he could before we made it back."

"A *coma*," says Zabuza again. "For a month."

Ryuishi blinks. Then, she lets out a yelp and immediately attempts to hurdle out of bed despite her pain and disorientation.

It ends very poorly for her, because her IV tugs painfully in her arm, and her ears fill with a ringing sound. There is a moment where the world goes black, and she feels far too dizzy, like she is spinning around after taking ten too many shots.

There are hands guiding her back down, and she is limp against them. She can hardly make her body move, and she has to grit her teeth to keep from screaming. Her entire side feels like it's on fire, but also like, maybe, there are knives in the fire inside her side.

"A month," she slurs in weak protest.

It echoes in her head like panic, and she can hear Kabuto emerge from whatever asscrack of the room he was hiding in. It should be okay if Kabuto knew, but a month is so *long*. She has so much work to catch up on now, she thinks as her vision slowly returns.

She can try and hold a pen or brush, but it's going to take forever. How in the ever living fuck is she going to catch up on the information? Or the plans and system checks in Otogakure? What if there was an emergency with the Mumei and she missed it because she was unconscious?

Good Ghandi, the paperwork. The finances and the subtleties in trade that might have gone unnoticed. What if Suna exported more glass than usual and there was a surplus of goods and the prices dropped a bit? The ripple effect would probably change the price of luxury goods, and there might be an uptake in fabric consumption, or dyes from Valley-

"I'm going to give her a mild painkiller, but please remember that too much stress could cause her to relapse," she hears Kabuto chide.

"Zabuza-sama, you know how she is. Don't bring it up-" Haku joins in, and it's only because he's peeled his teary face away from her

neck to chew out two grown men.

The drugs hit her like a hot stream of liquid fire into her veins, and for a moment she struggles against it. Depressants scare her, they always have. She died on morphine once, and she hates that her body begins to relax against her will.

Her mind is forcibly numbed, but she manages to think, *Kabuto knows I hate this shit*, before she loses coherence. Anger and panic drain away. All she can feel is mildly high and relaxed, and the pain echoes distantly instead of overwhelmingly.

Hate this, she thinks dully. It's like there is smoke in her head, fuzzing and softening the edges of reality. Deep in her gut there is a sense of nausea and fear, and she knows that it will last as long as the drugs do. Give her agony over this any day, give her bone deep pain and searing discomfort over this numbness.

"Z'buza?" she croaks, and he is there, warm and full of life. She feels his hand, strong and firm on her shoulder.

"... hate this," she tries to snap, but her voice is soft and distant. A breathless whisper.

"Perhaps if you did not strain your already weakened body, or stress yourself out so much, there would be other options," Kabuto tells her cheerfully. "I apologize for any discomfort, but you need to heal. You are still very hurt."

"I need to work," she whines. "I'm okay."

"You are not alright, and you will rest and get better," Kakashi informs her. "What needs to be done so badly?"

Ryuishi lifts her free hand slowly, mouthing words without a voice. Hesitantly, Kakashi leans over to hear her better, but he simply ends up with her cold hand on his face.

He eyes her with a deadpan expression as she stares him down, her eyes clouded. Her fingers trace the edges of his cheekbone for a second before her arm slides, as if the weight of the limb is too much for her to hold.

"All the things," she whispers to him, as if it is a great secret.

Zabuza snorts.

"Gotta cook dinner," she assures Kakashi.

"Ah," Kakashi states dutifully as her hand slips further, her fingers holding on to his neck as if clinging on for dear life. He never thought it would be this entertaining to see her reasoning impaired so much.

"Haku," she tries. "Needs food."

The young man, his eyes puffy and red from his tears, manages a smile as he turns back to her.

"I believe Haku has been fed appropriately," Kakashi assures her.

"But 'Buza can't cook," she tells him seriously. "Gotta feed you."

"I think we'll manage," Zabuza grunts with an eye-roll.

Kabuto takes his time eyeing her vitals, paying special attention to her blood volume, and her oxygen levels while she murmurs nonsense to the ninja around her. He knows that she feels deeply uncomfortable under sedation, but he doesn't particularly care at this point. Getting her to a point where she was stable enough to be awake was a journey in and of itself, and he won't allow her to compromise it in her typical way.

Kabuto is very aware of her habit of ignoring her injuries, but this is a fragile point in time where she could easily relapse. Already, the old woman in Kumo who runs many of the information networks has already sent word of her concerns, worded carefully to remind them

of the threats she is capable of carrying out should the Rakki Ryuu turn out to be betrayed.

A deadman's switch like the multiple ones Watanabe Ryuishi has set up is clever, but they are time sensitive. The longer she goes unseen, the more likely they are to be triggered. Orochimaru and her allies can postpone this, but they cannot hold it off forever.

She most likely set it up that way on purpose, so that her allies could not be the ones to destroy her.

Kabuto knows that a few alarms will have been triggered already, an early warning system. No traps should go off just yet, and that makes things less rushed, which is good, because multiple plans are coming to a head very soon. She needs to be able to converse without terrible pain, and some movement would be best. He's worked as hard as he can to restore use of her lungs to her, but there is only so much he can do in a short amount of time, and her cranial swelling took precedent.

She's weakened greatly, and as good as he is, he's no miracle worker. What she needs is time and rest, something she won't give herself. It's his job as Orochimaru's right hand to see that she receives rest at least, though time is not something he can give.

Kabuto watches her glassy eyes slide around the room. Even disoriented and sedated, she attempts to keep track of her surroundings, and even severely wounded she remains wary.

Good, he thinks. She'll need that.

AN: If this chapter feels like a bit of a confused cluster, then let me say I did my job right. When I say the akatsuki fucked her up, and that she was inches from death, I mean it. Ryuishi was really, really badly injured, to the point where even ninja magic can't fix her all the way. Also, there is a lot of hints and shit in this chapter. A bunch of them, foreshadowing on top of

foreshadowing. Out the ass plot. Hopefully, the characters also shine through, and it was really hard to write this chapter. SUPER HARD. If the last arc was a feels trip, this new one is a straight up rollercoaster of !?. So, hopefully this is a better segway/introduction to what is going on. If you are like ' *Uhhh, I'm sick of this feels/plot/whatever else* ' first of all, write your own story. Second of all, next weeks should be a double update and features SANDAIME SMACKDOWN AND POLITICS. I suggest ya'll brush up on some Feudal era/warring state era history of Japan, maybe check out the four kingdoms of ancient china.

Shout out to my lurkers, to my favoriters, and my followers. To my Reviewers, YOU FUCKING GUYS. YOU PUSHED THIS FIC PAST 5,000 REVIEWS HOLY SHIT.

To my beta enbi, you are the best. Thank you for making this chapter at least mildly comprehensible when I gave you absolute chaotic shit to work with.

Question: Where the fuck did Misaki and the brothel girls go?
OR What kind of shennanigans went down in the month Ryuishi was being held in the hospital?

In Which Old Secrets Come Out

I do not Own Naruto.

Ryuishi will stand by what she said all those years ago in Kiri. Hospitals are a disquieting reminder of her old world, with technology that doesn't fit and settings that are far too modern for some of the Stone Age bullshit she's had to deal with. Fluorescent lights are out of place, and so are movable hospital beds. She's gonna come out and say all this shit is weird: the IV's, the tech, the odd placidly-colored walls that make her mind feel numb, and the hospital gowns that reveal her butt.

She isn't real fond of the smell of hospitals, warm and distantly clean, mixed with traces of old blood and foul fluids. She can't say she's a huge fan of the long silences, only interrupted by the chimes, whirs, and beeps of various medical machines that show stats and numbers that mildly bewilder her. The utter stillness is unsettling, especially for someone like her. Years of field experience are screaming at her, telling her that's it's much too quiet and still. She's used to keeping track of barrages of kunai and multiple opponents, and the lack of mental stimulation is some sort of torture, she's sure of it. Especially since nobody is letting her do a damn thing.

Alright, maybe she has a tube sticking out of her, and she can't seem to catch her breath for the life of her. Yes, maybe sitting up causes her to maybe lose consciousness three out of five times. Of course she's still in pain, but it's like, distant now. It's muffled.

She's isolated in her private, secure room and it feels a little too much like confinement. It reminds her of Orochimaru's hideout, her shattered psyche, of long months spent underground with grey concrete as her sole companion, and only her voice for company. Of course she has some actual company now, but it's a little too nostalgic for her tastes.

It's day two since she has woken up, or so they tell her. Honestly, she fell asleep at some point under her sedation, which scared the piss right out of her (probably literally too, because catheters and all that). It feels like it has been a small eternity, though.

She's itching to get up and walk, to take a shower and get back to work. It buzzes under her skin, a drive to do something, *anything* at all besides sit there. Her spirit yearns to get down to business. Her body, however, has yet to get with the program. It's weak and shaky, and it feels like lead. A month hasn't done extreme damage to her strength or anything, but the wound has taken the breath quite literally out of her lungs, and her side makes it impossible to twist or move. That's not even counting whatever the fuck her brain thinks it's up to, with the random blackouts and intense and sudden bouts of disorientation that have cropped up a few times.

She is in no mood for the general dickery that comes along with what happened. She doesn't want the intense cold, or the straw-in-cup routine, because apparently she's five and can't drink out of a glass. She wants to stand up and walk around, maybe even run, not stretch in place, one muscle group at a time. While she's at it, she would like some solid food. She's not an invalid, or a baby. Liquid diets are bullshit.

"Get me some fruit or a platter of fish, but by the Green Man's leafy beard, I do not want any more broth," Ryuishi grumbles.

Haku, patient and stern, sits with the spoon outstretched in his hand. "It's lunch, and you need to eat. Solid foods could upset your stomach, and if you heave too hard you could dislodge the tubing," he tells her.

"Then get the tubing out, I can breathe just fine on my own," she lies.

He gives her an unimpressed glance that says he's not falling for it. He knows for a fact that there is remaining damage on her bronchial tubes, and that her alveoli are retaining blood. Kabuto is working on

a way to fix it, but this sort of damage is uncommon, and whatever is wrong with her head takes precedent.

"Young man, I will come out of this bed and get my own food, just you watch," Ryuishi states imperiously.

"I don't think you will have much luck with that, considering Zabuza," Haku says wryly, his eyes sliding to the man who looms over her threateningly, as if he will force her to drink the soup if she doesn't open her mouth.

"Zabuza is dead to me," she informs Haku flatly.

"You can shower later tonight if Kabuto-san sees fit to give you clearance," Haku sighs. "He was right in restraining you from getting up this morning."

Ryuishi crosses her arms petulantly, because her ribs are healed as best as they are going to get and her thigh is just fine. She could have put a plastic bag over the tube or something.

(Probably the 'something' because the plastic bag may have suffocated her.)

What she means is that she would have figured it out. A month without a proper shower is unacceptable, and also brings up uncomfortable questions, like who exactly had been giving her baths when she was out? And who the fuck put the catheter in?

"Eat the broth," Zabuza orders her, and she idly glares at him.

"Why don't you go eat a whole bag of dicks-" Ryuishi begins to berate, but the door to her room creaks open, and the ANBU guard standing watch peeks in, purple hair falling out of their cloak.

"You have visitors," they inform her detachedly.

Ryuishi pauses mid-sentence to blink, because she's being held in a high security room and is a political danger. What kind of visitors

would someone like her-?

"Nee-san?" asks a familiar voice curiously, and Ryuishi freezes. She goes from grumpy toddler to emotionally compromised caretaker in a second flat. Her eyes go wide, and her jaw slackens because there is no way they would let him see her.

"Naruto...?" she starts, but Haku takes the opportunity to jam a spoonful of broth past her parted lips, the utensil clacking against her teeth painfully. With a grimace, she sputters on her words and the liquid. She goes to spit it out, but Zabuza is there, covering her mouth before she can even purse her lips.

As Ryuishi is reflexively swallowing the salty, savory chicken broth, Team Seven steps through the doorway. That would be complex enough, but no, the fucking Sandaime Hokage is trailing behind them, smiling like the genial old man he seems to be.

Ryuishi isn't really sure what kind of first impression she wanted her team to give off. Strong, maybe. Capable, certainly. Perhaps even graceful, or at ease. That's not what she thinks the others are seeing. *This is worst than the time Orochimaru caught me putting tiny hats on his snakes*, she thinks hysterically to herself.

The two teams stand across the room from each other, and she swears that if there was wind, it would sweep between them dramatically, possibly with a tumbleweed like in an old Western. Her life has turned into a slapstick comedy of tragic proportions, and Zabuza doesn't even seem to care. He's just smiling at her victoriously from behind his mask because he is an unrepentant asshole. Haku, at least, seems to sense the implications here.

"She wouldn't eat," the teen informs the newcomers tonelessly, breaking the standstill.

"Ah," says the Hokage magnanimously. "I understand. I fear many of my own shinobi are similarly petulant when it comes to recovery."

(Kakashi very carefully does not flinch with guilt.)

Ryuishi does not care for the smooth, grandfatherly voice. It sends a chill down her spine as her brain kicks into overdrive, trying to work out his motive. Sarutobi Hiruzen is a clever man, and he did not get where he is today by acts of kindness. He was an ordinary clan shinobi in a world full of bloodlines, and he is skilled both on the battlefield and off.

Her eyes narrow as Zabuza's hand draws away from her face, and she tries to work out what his angle is. Eight years of service and he has never deigned to meet her before now, despite her political clout and economic power. No doubt, her association with Naruto coming into light changed his mind about what way he needed to approach the problem.

It strikes her then what his angle is, standing over Naruto's shoulder. This is a display, a silent message to her. He stands behind Team Seven because he can, because they are loyal Konoha shinobi, and they are under his care. She is in Konoha, alive because of his mercy, as is her team.

He holds the cards here, she thinks. Not all of them, because she is never powerless, but he certainly has a good hand.

"Nee-san?" asks Naruto again, and he is shielded on either side by his teammates. His big blue eyes are wide and cautious. He's spent hours coming in after training, praying that she would wake up, hoping that she would be okay. Now she's here, and the mask is gone, Her eyes are open and he missed her so much...

"Sunshine," she says back softly, because he is a precious piece of her heart. She has missed him so much, and she longs to hold him in her arms.

His smile is a brilliant thing, stretching ear from ear as he closes the space between them, laughing as he throws himself at her. She lifts her arms, ready to catch him as he launches himself through the air-

Zabuza snatches the genin by the jacket, halting him, and Ryuishi and Naruto make the same noises of protest.

"Chest tube," Haku informs them both sternly. "Strenuous activity can tear the sutures holding it in place. You both know better."

Ryuishi lets out a long groan, because hospitals suck and chest tubes are dumb and she's fucking fine now, dammit, let her embrace her damn child before the old man whisks him away into the fucking night or some shit.

"Naruto, you promised you wouldn't stress her out," Sakura chides, approaching the dangling child. Mercilessly, she reels back her hand and swats him on the back of the thigh, causing a yelp. She knows Naruto enough to know that pain helps him retain information for longer amounts of time. It's a proven fact. She and Ino did a study.

"I got excited!" he defends, his hands going to caress the stinging area.

Zabuza makes eye contact with the final member, the young Uchiha. Sasuke simply emulates Zabuza's stance, legs shoulder width apart and face stern. He understands that as Naruto's teammate, he has the responsibility to make sure Naruto remains under control, and he silently accepts his given mission.

Seeing that Naruto will be held in good hands, Zabuza drops him, turning his attention back onto Ryuishi and the broth. The boy lands like a cat, crouched on all fours.

"Not a good enough reason," Sasuke informs Naruto, nudging him with his foot.

"Shut up, asshole, she's awake and I maybe lost it a bit," Naruto bites out, scrambling to stand, dusting off his orange jacket.

"Well, perhaps Ryuishi and you can embrace in a gentler fashion when she's finished eating," Haku says with a pointed glance to said

woman. Ryuishi scowls at him, but she reaches out her hand for the bowl.

Haku sends her a cheery smile when she spoons the broth slowly into her mouth, her eyes moving to the two remaining men inside the room. She notes Kakashi's posture, seemingly relaxed and at ease, even though she can see the flicker of tenseness in his grey eye.

Then she moves onto the the Hokage, and she steels herself when she makes eye contact. Light hazel meets dark black, and in that moment she knows he's just as aware as she is of the undercurrents running through this room. He knows he has the advantage of familiar ground and more numbers than she can account for, but he also knows that she holds the the favour of his jinchuuriki and the children, not to mention economic clout. She has no doubt in her mind that if he thought he could get away with it he would wipe her from the board, but she's insulated herself to well for that.

His eyes flick casually to Zabuza and Haku, a placid smile on his face. Her grip goes white-knuckled on the bowl of broth, and she wants to spit and snarl, because he can't make her disappear, but if she isn't careful, those two are fair game. Her head begins to pound, and she hears a distant ringing in her ears.

Despite the anxiety inside her gut and the feelings of weakness, she sips calmly at her soup, even though it tastes like ash in her mouth. This is a carefully balanced act, and she must maintain the facade, just like Kakashi and Haku. Sometimes she wishes she were like Zabuza, though, and just didn't have it in her to give a single fuck.

"I have been reliably informed that you have done a great service for Konoha," the Hokage declares in a kind voice that Ryuishi knows damn well is fake. Probably.

"Ah, well, all in a day's work, I suppose," she demurs kindly, flashing a bright smile at the Hokage.

Kakashi can't help but admire how very real it looks, and he wonders if his acts are half as good as hers are. Two days out of a coma and she's already running, picking up on subtle cues and signals.

"No, that's not true. You didn't have any obligation to assist us," Sakura says, acknowledging the fact they are all ignoring, the fact that she is a missing-nin and wanted criminal.

"Well, I couldn't have left you in good conscience," Ryushi says smoothly.

"You could have died," Kakashi states to the room at large, and she notes the way he seems to be playing that side up. So that's how he's been spinning this, then? An asset defending a bigger asset because of loyalty to her handler and affection for a child, at great risk to self? It's a bit weak and emotional, but pretty good for his first time. Not to mention it's closer to the truth than she would want.

Still, she doesn't like the look everyone in the room is giving her. The emotions linked to them unsettle her, because better her than them. Better that she go than her darlings.

"You willingly engaged the enemy knowing that their strength exceeded yours, knowing that you were a target. Instead of running, you came back," Kakashi continues.

Ryuishi would like to point out that she didn't know that the Akatsuki were gunning for her at the beginning of the conflict, but to do so would undermine the point he's trying to sell. Actually, she would like to ask when they started aiming for her, and for what end they wanted her. She would also like to know if she shares genetic material with a suspiciously old tentacle spaghetti monster while she's at it, but thinking about it too hard is pretty disturbing. In fact, she had managed to ignore the implications before now, but damn Hatake had to go dragging that shit back up.

"Konoha is, of course, grateful," the Hokage says, and she feels the urge to spit in his face well up inside her. It's irrational, and petty, but

damn if she doesn't want to. "There remains details to discuss, but for now, I believe the genin of Team Seven are eager to make your acquaintance, or in some cases, re-acquaint themselves. I am sad to say that I have business to attend, but I shall be back."

Then he motions them forward, and she doesn't like the way he steps back, totally in control. She feels a the phantom sensation of a leash slipping around her neck as he glides toward the door, totally at ease, and she feels dizzy. Faint, even.

Power displays, she thinks, sipping at some more broth. The Hokage came to put me in my place. He controls when he arrives and when I get to see Kakashi and Naruto. He controls where I am placed and what will be done to my team. He has the numbers, the terrain, the people. He says when he comes and goes, nobody else.

And Ryuishi? Well, she might be cut off from her network at the moment, and her body might be feeling under the weather, but she has what she always had: the ability to improvise, adapt and overcome. She also has no compunctions about aiming below the belt and fighting dirty, should it come to that.

She catches a glimpse of Kabuto's grey hair and round glasses outside her door, and her eyes gleam for a moment. She might not even be needed in this fight, because Sarutobi made enemies before she was in this picture. She just has to hold on to what she has.

She feels a hand abruptly grab hers, and her bowl of broth almost spills, but she's quick enough to catch it. Sorta. She fumbles more than she has in a long while, and the room around her rolls.

"Nee-san," Naruto states, and she turns to take in sky blue eyes topped by furrowed brows. "You never told me you were a ninja."

"Missing-nin," she corrects automatically. She spots Sasuke's eyebrows shoot up at the casual admission.

"So a ninja-" he tries to needle, but she pins him with a hard stare and he stops mid sentence. Across the room, Kakashi marvels at the skill and wonders how he can learn it.

"Don't equate. It's not the same thing," she tells him frankly.

"You were a ninja once, though! You had a village, and I bet you had a home you liked and a Team you cared about," he protests, and she'll give the kid credit. The boy knows how to cut her down in seconds flat. She can literally feel the temperature drop in the room. The heart monitor picks up speed and she sucks in a short breath of air, because no, all of those things hurt to think about. They hurt so much.

"Kiri isn't Konoha, brat," Zabuza intones, and he's there. He's sturdy and firm and she isn't alone.

"Naruto, if you don't stop stressing her, we will leave," Kakashi warns, but she holds up her hand to stop him.

"He didn't know," she defends, lifting her head and looking at the young ones inside the room. She can hear rushing water, and she feels sick. Her vision is blurry and she can see spots of black.

"Ryuishi-" Haku protests, because she's barely been awake any time at all. Her breath still comes in wheezes and he can see her strain.

She wants to explain, but she can't actually force the words out to describe why they aren't the same. She can't think of Kiri without her head spinning and her chest seizing. She can't describe what it was like to be hungry and cold and afraid. What it was like to live in filth, so alone, so afraid, caught somewhere in between madness and sanity. She can't describe the fire and blood of war. She can't say what it was like to shatter completely, into such small pieces that not even her team could piece her back together.

Her mouth feels dry and her vision begins to fade when she thinks about the years of isolation, of Orochimaru and Otogakure. She

wants to forget the years of waiting, of suffering with only bright flares to lead her through the darkness as she struggled to set up a world that might be a little better than what she was born into. The sins she has committed over the years, the blood and tears that soak her clean though until they reach her bones, they weigh her down.

Naruto is her Sunshine, and he makes her warm when she is cold. She does not want to smother him out, to drag him down to what she is.

She wants to explain, but where does she begin? Where does she start? Nobody in this room knows all of her secrets, knows the things she hides. Not a single person in this whole world knows her truths, her story from start to stop.

The ringing in her ears grows deafening, and she feels something crawling on her legs, just as the bowl of broth is snatched from her lap. For a moment she's pretty sure she's about to black out, but she feels hands on her face, and her vision clears enough to see sky blue eyes.

"NEE-SAN I'M SORRY, DON'T DIE-"

"Naruto," she croaks, cutting the boy off. "I'm not dying." She blinks a few times to clear her vision, and when she does she realizes that Haku is attempting to bodily remove Naruto from her bed, more irritated than he's ever seen him. He has a firm hold on his waist, and Sakura and Sasuke each have a leg in their grasp.

"She's in intensive care for a reason, you idiot!" Sakura growls.

"You are going to crush her with your massive weight," Sasuke joins in.

"I cannot believe you, not five seconds ago I warned you about her chest tube, and I will break every finger in your hand if you make her relapse, sibling or not!" Haku hisses dangerously.

The word sibling causes her heart rate to spike again, and she's seconds away from either crying or fainting as Naruto screams in her face.

"-I LOVE YOU, I DON'T CARE IF YOU'RE A MISSING NIN, YOU SAVED US-" he screeches, until a hand is clamped over his mouth and he is lifted, squirming and thrashing, out of reach of the other children. His muffled yelling can be heard from behind a large hand, and Zabuza grunts as he hoists the boy into the air.

For a moment, the sound stops and Zabuza grits his teeth behind his mask. Brown eyes slide to meet hers. "He bit me," Zabuza states tonelessly, and she smiles as consciousness reasserts itself.

"Just like old times," she jokes, feeling Haku's steadying hand on her shoulder. She turns to him as he frets over her.

"You didn't punish him enough," Haku accuses quietly.

"No. Someone could smack him all day, everyday and he wouldn't learn. He's just like that," chimes in a higher pitched voice, and in her peripheral vision, she sees Sakura fixing the blankets by her legs. Green eyes meet hers, and the genin flushes from the roots of her hair down to the collar of her shirt. The girl bows, her hands leaving the blankets where they had been thoughtlessly fixing them, and finding themselves clenched by her sides.

"I'm Haruno Sakura. Thank you for saving my team," the girl says sincerely. The Uchiha by her side sinks into something similar, but more formal. A proper clan bow.

"Uchiha Sasuke," the boy huffs. "I apologize for misjudging you."

Ryuishi does a pretty good imitation of a fish for a moment, her mouth opening and closing without sound. Distantly, she is aware of Naruto being passed from Zabuza to Kakashi in the background with the murmur of, "Control your brood, Hatake."

She honestly doesn't know what to react to. There's so many options.

"Watanabe Ryuishi," is what she ends up saying, dipping her head forward. "It is a pleasure to meet you, though I wish it was under better circumstances." It goes unsaid that there isn't actually a lot of circumstances that would have been what she called 'good' for them to meet under.

"This is all very nice," Haku says kindly. "But Ryuishi needs to drink her broth so she can heal."

And like that, she realizes that Haku probably got his cleverness from her. It's something she didn't quite mean to pass on, but here he is, nudging their hands apart with a smile and urging the now lukewarm soup at her like a particularly naggy mother-in-law while the room full of people watch.

She levels him with a flat look, but the teenager just smiles at her like there's not a thing wrong in the world, and picks the spoon up of her lap in an attempt to feed her.

"Haku," she says blandly.

"Eat it," demands Zabuza, standing near Kakashi.

"Eaa ihh," Naruto joins in, his mouth muffled by his jounin-sensei's hand.

"It's good for you," Kakashi taunts, and the two quiet genin watch her from her bedside expectantly.

Ryuishi caves with a tired huff, and reaches out her hands for the bowl. She can't set a bad example, and she can't fight against a room full of people when their demands are so simple.

Damn Haku though, for knowing when and how to push his point across.

(She's pretty proud of her family.)

She gets to take a shower later when the team leaves, which is heavenly. Unfortunately, it is not unassisted or what she would consider alone.

"What is taking so long?" Zabuza demands from the other side of the open door, and she scowls.

"It's pretty hard to shave when a medic-nin has to keep the hole in your torso dry, Zabuza," she bites out. "So excuse me if it's taking a while."

Kabuto, ever the medical professional, gives her a mean smirk as she runs the razor down her legs. Her hair is already clean, and she's taken care of most of her hygiene, but her legs were a full-out forest after a month of sleep, and don't even get her started on her armpits or other areas.

The shower has a convenient plastic seat for her, and she's almost on her way to feeling human again. She's been told that she gets her pants after this, *and* she can even wear her crop top as long as she keeps the tubing free.

"Perhaps you should have allowed him to assist you instead," Kabuto snarks, and she rolls her eyes.

"Look, Kabuto, I get that you would rather have a big strong man in the shower with you rather than be helping me, but I promise you that is a bad idea," Ryuishi informs him.

Mostly because she would not want Zabuza to be there when she blacked out earlier, and also because she's pretty sure he can't make the glowing green chakra dome that Kabuto has pressed around her side to keep the moisture out.

"Such lowbrow humor, senpai," Kabuto drawls. "It's almost like you were born in a brothel."

"You know, you were a hundred percent cuter when you were a ten year old genin," she snipes at him. It goes unsaid that he was never really a genin, and that he never really had a chance at childhood.

Some may ask why Kabuto was allowed in with her at all, but it was simply one of the many changes from canon. Kabuto had no need to remain a genin with Orochimaru's scrapped plans, and he was easily one of the best medics in Konoha. He was allowed to freely move up the ranks to be closer to records and have a greater influence over Konoha as it was. She can't be sure what his cover rank is now, but she knows it's high enough to be head doctor for a political prisoner like her.

"Well, I hear that you were much cuter covered in blood and bruises," Kabuto says and she snorts, shaving the last bit of her ankle.

"Careful kiddo, your sadistic side is showing," she chides gently, going to rinse.

"Ah, I apologize. Sometimes it slips out after a long day of healing," he fires back, and she gently nudges his forehead with her fingers while he gives her a positively poisonous smile.

"Hurry up!" comes the demand from Haku. Ryuishi sighs while she shuts off the water and Kabuto reaches around the curtain to grab towels for her, which she uses to quickly dry off, savoring the stretch of her muscles after such a long time of lying down. She knows she can't do anything crazy, but just hearing her joints pop and feeling her muscles burn sends a rush of warmth and satisfaction through her veins.

After she dries her body, Kabuto hand her a set of undergarments, once more pulled from her traveling pack. She manages to finagle her way into them, and she drapes the towel over her shoulder to

keep her still-damp hair off her neck, and Kabuto takes her arm to help her walk.

The tile is cold against her bare feet, and her legs feel a bit unsteady still. Even as they rise to stand, she feels the world slip sideways and her ears ring for a second, and Kabuto silently takes her weight as the world goes fuzzy for a second.

"Son of a bitch," she mutters, but her voice sounds distant, and it takes a moment of intense focus and counted breaths for the world to come back into focus. "Fuck head wounds," she finally breathes, forcing herself to take a step forward, and Kabuto simply raises his brow imperiously at her.

As soon as she steps through the door, Zabuza is quick to take over Kabuto's place, stooping so she can throw her arm around his shoulders as she determinedly stays upright, walking over to her things.

"I wouldn't tarry too long, Ryuishi-san," Kabuto warns her, going to check over her charts one last time. It goes unsaid that the ANBU guard change won't remain away for much longer, and that there are plots afoot.

"Thank you for the help," she states calmly before he slips out the door. Honestly, she could give less of a shit if her creepy watchers catch her without pants.

Still, for all her posturing and griping, it takes a lot out of her just to dress herself and make herself presentable. Her head feels vaguely fuzzy, and she's fighting off dizzy spells left and right. It makes her all the more determined, but Zabuza can apparently sniff out weakness like a bloodhound. He's hovering over her, steadying her when she sways, and letting her wear herself out until she's slumped against him. She's not so much walking as she is drunkenly staggering using him as a crutch, feeling her anesthetics give out as the dull agony tears through the back of her head.

"Fuck this," she mumbles, taking a wheezy breath.

"Sit down," he tells her, but she grits her teeth.

"I fuckin' took down a squad of hunter-nin, I should be able to stand on my own," she complains, and he lets out a huff, his hand firm on her shoulder.

"Sit. Down," he forces out again, and this time he really doesn't give her an option. He scoops her up like she weighs no more than a sack of rice, and he plops her back down in the bed. He feels frustration well up inside him as he listens to the soft hiss of air being pushed out from the tube in her side and sees her brows furrow in pain.

"I'm fine," she tries to say, and he feels like breaking things.

"Don't say that," he tells her. He doesn't want to hear it, not ever again. Every time she says it he's back on that barge, holding her down as she shrieks, bubbles of blood foaming from her mouth, her side caved in like a smashed gourd.

Thirty-two days he waited for her to wake up. Thirty-two days of listening to the infernal noise that the machines made, of having medics periodically rush in as her vitals began to drop. Thirty-two days of this room, of having that snake bastard's spy tending over her while he sat and waited. Thirty-two days of standing guard over Haku while the boy fretted, of Naruto and his team appearing sporadically with an escort to stand in a silent vigil over her bed.

It was a month, and every night of it the Copy-nin came and haunted her room like a phantom. He stood in the shadows, bringing files and clues. While the world slept, the two men stood sentry with the shared understanding that they had failed her.

Now she's been up for two days, one of which she spent drugged, slurring nonsense. The relief he had felt as she babbled and slurred was like nothing he had felt before.

She's so eager to get up, but he's not going to let her break herself. He can't, not when the silence was overwhelming, and she was always so cold.

"Ryuishi, please stop," Haku says gently, draping himself over her legs. She shifts, or attempts to, but his weight holds her down.

"I have to get up. We're in a foreign land, and the Hokage-"

"You almost died," Zabuza stresses, and she snaps her mouth closed at the accusation.

He leans in closer, pushing a stray lock of hair from her face, and she watches him. He can almost taste the nervous energy leaking out of her.

"The men in cloaks almost killed you," he tells her, his voice low and serious. "You were in a coma for thirty two days. You are still injured."

She doesn't speak. She just stares at them, her lips pursed and her eyes unapologetic, like she knows exactly how close she came to death.

"I'm scared," she admits quietly. "If I can't control it, it's all going to fall to ruin."

Silently, Zabuza shifts her again, and the hospital bed groans as he moves his weight onto it. It's uncomfortable, to say the least. Hospital beds were not made for more than one person, let alone the three that are piling in on one another.

It's worth it though, when she settles against him, half on top of him, and Haku crams himself in as well. Though it is not like home, it is better now. Safer, and familiar.

"It's not your job to control everything," Haku reminds her, and she seems to fight the thought with every piece of herself.

"But-" she tries.

"Rest," he says firmly, and she huffs. Her breathing begins to ease, and she turns her head to cast one last look at him, a fond smile on her face.

Zabuza is just glad that she's alive and awake to give it.

Everybody is.

If there is one thing that Ryuishi doesn't want to see when eating her first solid(ish) food in a small eternity, it's the motherfucking Hokage.

It's not actually what she considers solid food, but it *is* food-instead of liquid soup-and she's actually glad they made her consume the broth first. The rice porridge is watery and bland, but it's also dense, and she can't remember reacting this way to food since the first time she left Kiri and tried to eat a big meal. (Hint: it didn't stay down.)

She's taking it slow, wishing she could stomach some coffee and maybe contemplating starting an Uno game when he walks in, unannounced, once again silently displaying his complete and utter control of the situation.

"I believe," he begins in that kind voice, "that there are things to discuss."

Just like that, she's done eating, and half a bowl of gruel is pushed to the side. Her nerves fire up inside her, but she smothers her bodily reactions down as best she can. She can't help that her heart rate picks up half a beat, but she hates that it does anyway.

"Oh? And what would those be?" she asks with false calm. Her voice is soft and pitched low, and Zabuza hones in on it, silently moving himself between the hospital bed and the Hokage, Haku hidden behind his back. The atmosphere seems to shift, and there is a stiff undercurrent of tension inside it.

"Have you been enjoying your stay?" the Hokage asks, and she narrows her eyes. "Konoha is widely considered the best in the medical field, and it's good to see such fine results."

Ryuishi just about rolls her eyes, because she's not falling for that. He can't squeeze out any sense of debt or gratitude from her with that sort of bullshit. "It's a fine down payment for the services I previously provided," she answers coolly, and something shifts in his gaze.

"Ah, my dear, I think you misunderstand. The payment for those services was your continued good health itself. After all, missing-nin are not openly allowed to wander, and should be brought to justice," he tells her, and the threat in that one is pretty clear.

"You're a smart man, Sarutobi-san," she drawls. "You know if I was just a missing-nin this would have ended long ago, with me lying dead in some shallow grave."

He smiles, and though many would call it nice, she would not. "Ah yes, your status does bring some trouble with it, but I think that any established court would have no trouble with bringing you to justice. Not to mention, you are not the only missing-nin in this room," he alludes.

She bristles, flashing her teeth at him. True, the courts could try her and snuff out some of the more loud Mumei, but the ideas she spread would never die now. They both know it, and they both know that without her, there would be dissension and chaos in her ranks. Enough chaos that it would spread to his own ranks, enough to stay his hand.

Zabuza, as legendary as he is, was a different story. He had just made his debut, and if she was kept somewhere, his death would cause far less disorder to the Mumei. To her, however, it would be everything, and the Hokage knows it.

"And trained citizens without an village alliance are trouble on their own," the man says, alluding to Haku. She clenches her fist, because he has her by the balls. He's clever, she'll give him that. If he wasn't such a pain, she'd even respect him, but she hates his facade. She hate it because it is her own.

Ryuishi is about a breath away from asking what he wants when the option is taken from her.

"I do believe you are misinformed on a few points, *sensei* ."

The smooth rasp is unmistakable, and Ryuishi has enough time to savor the widening of the Hokage's eyes. There is shock there, and for a moment, a hint of anger, but more than that, there is accusation on his weathered face, aimed at her, and he isn't completely wrong.

Ryuishi thanks the heavens for Orochimaru's impeccable fucking timing, even if he did have to wait until the last moment because he's a diva. Sure, this is going to complicate things beyond all fucking comprehension, but dammit, this was how she wanted to come out, not in some podunk city in the Land of Rivers.

She had a plan, they both did, and though it's scuffed around the edges, it's still intact. Sure, subtleties are off the board now, but there is something to be said about dropping guises altogether.

In front of her, Zabuza edges back towards her and Haku frowns. It's obvious they don't like the fact that he has arrived, but Ryuishi is actually grateful. They may not like him, may hate him, but Ryuishi feels... safer. Orochimaru's interest here is clear to her, and he finds no appeal in emotionally crippling her. He has yet to threaten Zabuza or Haku in the way that the Hokage just did. In fact, because he knows she would crumble without them, he has a vested interest in protecting them to an extent.

He may be a bastard, but he was there when no one was. He has continued treading the grey areas, and he hasn't stabbed her in the back. They work, and they've built so much. While she would never

trust the tricky bastard to be anything but himself, she also knows that as long as she remains within certain boundaries, he will remain inside certain parameters as well.

She realizes the full hypocrisy of her relief, and the source of her delusions of safety. Orochimaru didn't hold her for years without nurturing some source of positive emotions in her. It's fucked up, always has been and always will be, but it's the truth.

The Hokage slides back into a defensive position, and like magic, cloaked figures appear around him as his one-time pupil walks through the door. It is a double whammy for the old man, though, because not only is Orochimaru completely unbothered by his call to arms, but he isn't alone either.

Senju Tsunade is a beautiful woman, even if it is some sort of technique, but the stern expression on her face dissuades Ryuishi from assuming any sort of geniality, not that she would in the first place. She stands, silent and disapproving, shoulder to shoulder with her once teammate, and the tension in the room is suddenly palpable.

"You-" the old man chokes, his eyes darting around the room. It seems he can't pick a target to focus on, but Ryuishi would probably choose the two Sannin if it was her. She's small fry in a fight in comparison, if it comes down to that.

"Me," agrees Orochimaru, his golden eyes gleaming with mirth. He detaches the veil around his face, giving the room a full look at his pale complexion and manic smile. "Aren't you supposed to be happy, sensei? It's the homecoming of two of your students after so many long years."

Ryuishi attempts not to raise her brow at the sheer amount of venom in that statement. It's not emotional, per se, but it is more passionately delivered than Orochimaru's usual detached tone. It's not the lazy drawl of their conversations, or his warning hiss, but a scathing statement delivered in a tone meant to cut.

Ryuishi will give the Hokage credit though, because he smiles, a jagged thing like broken glass, but truly intimidating nonetheless.

"I admit, I am overwhelmed. To think I didn't see the similarities earlier. How long have you planned this with your planted spy? Did you raise her up, teach her as your own, mold her as you saw fit?" he says.

"I resent that implication," Ryuishi says, and Haku sends her a panicked, warning glance that screams for her to *shut up* .

It seems, however, that Orochimaru finds this statement pretty funny. It starts low in his throat, a quiet chuckle, but it seems he can't contain it, and he openly laughs in the face of his old sensei, his hand held over his mouth.

She's actually never heard him laugh like this before, and she's been hanging around Orochimaru for thirteen years.

"Spy?" he hisses mirthfully. "You think she is a lowly plant? You must have grown senile in your old age, *Sarutobi-sensei* . The woman in that bed co-founded a village, and you have the audacity to call her an agent?"

The Hokage makes a low sound in his throat and seems to look again at the scene, taking in the robes and hat that Orochimaru is wearing, and the symbol adorning them. He freezes in place and darts his eyes toward her, then back to Orochimaru, then to her once again.

"The Land of Rice," he breathes, realization flickering in his eyes. "Otogakure."

Orochimaru's grin is predatory, and the chakra is so thick in the room that she can practically taste it. That's saying a lot, because she's usually dead to the world when it comes to sensing, but now she can almost pick it out with her shitty vision alone.

"Do you understand now, old man?" Orochimaru says with a cold smile.

Ryuishi notices his wrinkled brow furrow, and his lips turn downward. From the looks of things, he's beginning to get it.

Good, she thinks spitefully. That's what he gets for trying to use the people she loves against her.

AN: I have been duly informed that my medical jargon/techniques make no sense. Let it be known I know first aid and that's about it, so even this much had me researching my ass off. However, I have blacked out more than my fair share of times, so that's fairly accurate. In other news, Oh shit. Politics. Orochimaru comes strolling in and holds no punches. Shits about to get real in this double update.

A quick shout out to my lurkers, holla at my favoriters and followers. A chest thump and firm fist pound to my reviewers.

And to Enbi, my wonderful beta, that you for attempting to make sense of this chaos. You are my priceless beta, the one ring to my smeagol.

question in the next chapter.

In Which Chaos Begins

I do not own Naruto. Also, remember all that politicking Oto did in chapter 66? That was important. Hope you were paying attention.

The tension in the hospital room is unreal, Ryuishi thinks.

The chakra surges around them like a current, swirling from something smooth and cold like scales, and something unmoved and unbroken, like the earth itself. If this is how most people sense chakra, she wants nothing to do with it, because it's overwhelming and demands her attention, a gossamer energy that dances across her brain, tingling with half-read intentions and threats.

The chakra is bad, yes, but the bubbling undercurrent is problematic as well. The room is divided into sections, groups of people standing together based on loyalty, drawing clear lines that usually wouldn't be so obvious. There is Ryuishi, sheltered unwillingly in her hospital bed by Zabuza, and behind him, Haku. Across from them is Orochimaru, looming near the doorway, accompanied by a stern-faced Tsunade, and between the two groups is the Hokage, guarded by a trio of ANBU in bone white masks.

For a second she feels herself acknowledge the stress, and her machines pick up on it, beeping faster. Her vision blurs, and for a moment she feels dizzy again, her vision bordered by black haze. She struggles with it, even though doing so gives her a massive headache, and she counts her breathing.

Seven in, hold four, seven out.

"Ryuishi," Haku whispers, bracing her shoulder where she had begun to droop forward, and she flashes him what she hopes is a comforting smile.

(It isn't. It looks like a strained flash of teeth.)

"I believe that she is in need of assistance," hisses Orochimaru, his golden eyes flashing. "Will you allow us to pass, Ho-ka-ge-sama?"

"I'm not in the habit of letting two dangerous missing-nin regroup," the Hokage states calmly, though there is strain around his eyes.

At this, Orochimaru mimics an appalled expression. As always, he sells human emotion too hard and looks more like a Noh actor or drama queen than a person experiencing confusion.

"Why sensei, haven't you heard? I paid reparations for my crimes years ago, and was pardoned by the Fire daimyo himself. I acknowledge my actions were horrible, but I have paid my debt to society," he informs the Hokage with mock-solemnity, and Ryuishi feels like rolling her eyes. There is such a thing as overkill, and though he's probably delighted by how much fun he's getting out of this, he's coming across as a real diva.

She would also like to say that when he says he paid his debt to society, he means he used his tricky ties with nobility, his acceptance into the daimyo's courts, and her goods to negotiate a material price to pay for his crime. Don't get her wrong, she thinks that shit is shady as fuck, and also that he's actually atoned for jack shit, but it's not like there are any actual court systems with a jury of peers anywhere outside the larger cities of the Land of Rice. So the ruling made by the daimyo was accepted, though it helps that the Rice daimyo also advocated for him as well.

It's not a feat she can ever reproduce by any means. For one, she doesn't have Orochimaru's clout in the royal courts, and in all actuality, there is a gaping tension between her factions and the noble lines. For another thing, she burnt down a military-ruled city and set the Land of Water aflame with rebellious spirit, something the daimyo aren't going to be quick to forget. Compared to Orochimaru's listed crimes, her own actions are significantly more serious. Funny, how in the eyes of the law, she's the most fucked up

person in this room. She likes to think that they're all fucked up on an equal level.

... Except Haku. He's good. What in the world is he doing with them all?

"You always were clever, Orochimaru," the Hokage admits. "But you forget that even if you are clear of your past crimes, entering a foreign Hidden Village without permission is a crime in and of itself. I could still kill you where you stand."

"But *sensei*," Orochimaru spits scathingly. "You invited me here, did you not? The Otokage was cordially asked to attend the upcoming Chuunin exams. It is a common act of manners among allies, or did you forget that the Land of Fire and the Land of Rice have a non-aggression treaty between each other, signed years ago? A treaty that can only be broken by acts of war, such as significant loss of lives or resources, or the murder of a political figure."

His golden eyes shine, the slits dilating in excitement. His grin grows to truly unsettling proportions, and he looms. More than anything else, his presence seems to take up far more space than it should, swallowing the entirety of the room.

"Would you start a war, sensei, by attacking me when the law is on my side?"

Ryuishi wants to laugh at how complete the defeat is, but she's actually damn near passed out. Her breathing is ragged, and while she would like to throw out a sick one-liner, she's having trouble because the ringing in her ears has started back up, and drawing a breath is hard work. The chakra in the air is feeding directly into her chest, and her body is going fucking nuts.

"Ryuishi!" Haku calls out, and she can feel his hands on her shoulders, but fuck, responding is kind of a bitch right now.

"While there are many things to talk about, I'm fairly certain the hospital room of a patient who is likely to relapse under heavy stress is not the place to do it," snaps a female voice. "I came here to exam her, and I am going to do it."

"You won't touch her," a low voice intones. Zabuza, ever defensive.

"That's Senju Tsunade," Haku bites out in a furious whisper. "If anyone can heal Ryuishi, she can. She's the best medic in the world."

Ryuishi isn't quite aware of the glance the two share, or the smug smile that Tsunade wears from being recognized even after all these years. She is only aware of her manufactured calm, her counted breaths and foggy vision, spotted with darkness, and the ache inside her head. She is also aware of bodies moving as the female cuts through the room in a confident stroll, and the figure that ducks around Zabuza and places their tepid hands on her temples.

"I've been updated on her medical history on the way here, and I am aware of her pre-existing conditions, but is there anything new to inform me of?" Tsunade asks, tilting her patient's head up. Ryuishi registers eyes the color of honey, and a soft peachy complexion, clear and smooth.

"She reacts poorly to situational pressure and heightened emotional states, and there's been swelling in her alveoli and amygdala," Haku rattles off immediately somewhere to her right.

Tsunade makes a considering face, and Ryuishi feels trepidation. Isn't the brain a bit of a complex thing to start off with after a long hiatus from healing? Maybe she should start with some abrasions or lacerations first-

"Hold still," Tsunade orders her, and she has enough time to hear her monitor spike in speeds after she registers those words before her vision goes black, and then fills with green.

"You weren't kidding about her chakra, Orochimaru," Tsunade grunts, but Ryuishi is only aware of the pressure in her skull lessening, and her muscles unwinding. The ringing in her ears peaks, and there is white noise for a moment, followed by the distant lapping of water over rocks.

There are pains she never really noticed that begin to fade-an ache in her lower back, and the stiffness in her shoulders. Her stomach unclenches for the first time in recent memory, and Ryuishi can't actually remember the last time she felt this... *calm* . Actually calm and relaxed. Not disassociating, not repressing, not suppressing or burying, but actually fucking relaxed. Which is funny, because she should probably be a thousand times more stressed out, but she feels good for the first time in a long while and she's so calm she couldn't give a fuck.

Is this what Zabuza feels like all the time? she wonders.

When she opens her eyes again, her headache is gone, and there is a tiny drop of some sort of fluid suspended in the glowing chakra.

"I may have been out of the medical field for a while," Tsunade drawls, "but I do believe that if you put this under a slide, you'd find cortisol, catecholamines, vasopressin, GH, and epinephrine."

"What," Ryuishi says flatly.

"Hormones," Haku tells her quietly, his eyes shining with awe. "She pulled out stress hormones."

"It's tiny," Ryuishi says, squinting at it. It can't be bigger than a mustard seed or two.

"It's visible to the naked eye," Tsunade tells her seriously. "The knock to the head caused a disruption and swelling, and this is what built up over a month without a physical release or outlet." Here the honey-colored eyes pin her, and even though she feels like she's floating on a cloud, she freezes on instinct. There are questions

inside those eyes, and they demand an answer. More than just medical queries. So much more.

"How much stress have you been putting up with, girl? This is far too much for such a short amount of time, and it's just a buildup of the normal amount. What kind of life have you been leading?"

Ryuishi laughs, because really? "Look around the room, and you tell me," she states, her husky voice calm as Tsunade slides the sample into some secret medic thing, her hands moving down to her chest.

"Orochimaru can provoke that kind of reaction," Tsunade agrees quietly, and Ryuishi can't help but snicker.

"To think, two of my students would turn their backs on their home and end up like this," the Hokage grumbles, but there is a flicker of something in his eyes that Ryuishi can't name.

"I'm just an escort for a politically important ally, coming back for a long overdue talk with my old teacher," Tsunade says smoothly, but there is an audible creak as the muscles in her fist tighten, and the inflection she puts on his title is strange. There's underlying emotion there, resentment and bitterness.

"And I am here to collect my compatriot and her team, as the customary company to keep while we wait for the exams," Orochimaru adds with a smile.

"Is it customary for a Kage to keep close company with missing-nin?" asks the Hokage pointedly.

"I would ask you the same thing, but from what I see here, there are no missing-nin. Momochi Zabuza has been removed from the most recent publication of the Kirigakure bingo books, and there are rumors he has a long-term assignment as liaison to a politically sensitive ally of the new Mizukage," Orochimaru says, his smile turning devious.

(It's good to hear that Mei won and kept up her end of the deal, Ryuishi thinks with manic relief. She would probably forgive the entire debt the rebels owed her right then and there if they had been standing in front of her.)

The implications are pretty clear: the Hokage is at a standstill. He may have the numbers and the land advantage, but Ryuishi and Orochimaru have enough ties to blow this whole continent up. The Land of Fire may have the manufacturing end of most things, but the Land of Rice has the raw production power, and its grip on the market has only solidified as the years went on.

Not only that, but publicly claiming Ryuishi as co-founder of Otogakure puts her under the treaty's protection, and if she or Orochimaru bite the dust, the Hokage will have sparked a war with his own dinner table against the Fire daimyo's express wishes. Zabuza now stands out of reach as well, as the liaison from Kiri and her personal friend, and Haku is a tangled mess of associations as their ward.

All this time, she thinks. All this work, and here I am.

A small grin creeps along her lips, and it feels great. For a second she hears victorious howls echo in her memories, and she can taste the salty sea even while the air is knocked from her chest as the tube is withdrawn. Which, straight up, is the most uncomfortable feeling ever. She didn't even notice the stitches being pulled free, but she definitely can't ignore the strange slithering tube gliding out of her after she takes a deep breath. Or the half second where the hole in her side hisses as it lets air out.

"You had excellent care," Tsunade tells her, eyeing Haku, who seems enraptured as he winds the tube and pulls her stitches, observing the woman move her hands around Ryuishi's chest.

"They'll be glad to hear it," she rasps, but it doesn't take so much effort to breathe anymore, and it doesn't feel... bubbly.

"Indeed. Such good care provided by an ally." Orochimaru stresses like the vindictive ass he is. "Hopefully, the lodgings I chose for us will be equally as accommodating."

Ryuishi leans forward, and for the first time since the incident, she takes a deep breath, feeling it rush inside of her while Tsunade watches. It's honestly so satisfying if hurts, and she as loose and languid as a winding stream. Ready to take on the world once again.

"You'll need another few sessions, and to stay away from stressors," Tsunade says, earning a smile from Ryuishi and a snort from Zabuza.

"Many thanks," Ryuishi offers with a bow of her head, ignoring the bastard, or rather, all of the bastards. There sure is a lot of them in this room.

Near the doorway, Orochimaru shifts, his gold eyes crinkled in the corners with satisfaction. As always, his smile is like the blade of a well crafted sword-sharp and beautiful, but made to draw blood.

"We really must take our leave. So much stress isn't good for her fragile health, and I must rest after such a long and tiring journey. I'm sure you and your pupil have so much to discuss," he drawls, and Tsunade's eyes flash. There's no fucking way Orochimaru is tired, he's just asserting control over the situation, like the Hokage did before him.

Ryuishi takes the hint for what it is, and she reaches out for Zabuza to help her stand. It's certainly not easy, but it is much smoother and far less tiring than it was. Wordlessly they gather their things, and Ryuishi can't help but catch the Hokage's eyes one last time as she walks across the floor, a smile on her face.

Maybe he can grind her into a pulp, and maybe he can hold her past against her, but Ryuishi has ways of fighting as well, and everybody has skeletons in their closet. She's always been pretty good at figuring out what they are, and finding ways to use them.

Ryuishi is quick to tire out, but she rides the high as best she can, skirting around the tail end of Orochimaru's billowing robes. He has his little square mask back on, but she can almost *feel* the smugness rolling off of him as he glides through Konoha, followed by Ryuishi and her team. (And probably Anbu, but Ryuishi can't sense them, and her nose is too busy clearing itself of hospital stink.)

He is in one hundred percent peacock-ing mode when he sweeps into what Ryuishi can say are the fanciest lodgings she has ever been in. The hostess behind the counter takes one look at the hat on his head and gracefully shows them to adjoining buildings (whole fucking buildings, like damn!), raggedy clothes and sloppy hair be damned.

They make it approximately five steps inside the entry room, and three seconds after the door closes before he whirls around to face her, eyes alight.

"That," he says, "was far more satisfying than any death I could have planned."

"It was actually incredible to watch you smack him down with words and looks alone. I bet he cries himself to sleep tonight," she tells him, because Orochimaru deserves it. He's a cold-hearted, callous bastard with cunning and skill, and a curiosity that never stops asking how far he can build. In a world full of cold bastards, he at least has the integrity not to hide it.

Or, whatever. She's a hypocrite, and she just saw the fruition of many years of planning, and it was a sound political lashing. In the arena of wordplay, Sarutobi just got fucking *served* .

"One can only hope," Orochimaru rasps, and damn, he must be fucking elated, because that was some mirth from him. She's actually shaky she's so giddy, and she's trembling against Haku and Zabuza as they support her.

"It was very good improv, considering we wanted to walk in here like the royal court and spit it as his feet," she comments, and Zabuza hefts her up, taking some of the weight of her feet. She laughs with the motion of it, sliding down a bit.

"I'll expect you to report later, but settle yourselves in. I expect fitting behavior from you, and that includes appearance," Orochimaru nags, and she knows that, but dear Vishnu let her enjoy this grand escape while it lasts. She hasn't felt this good in years.

"Understood," she says with a nod. He goes to leave again, but she can't just let him go.

"Orochimaru," she calls, and he looks back at the woman, who despite being in a coma less than four days ago, who is grievously wounded, and who barely escaped with her life only to find herself in a political mess, is smiling.

"Thank you," she says, and he smiles beneath his mask, because he knows she means it.

She does, because for all his shit and shade, for all the ups and downs, when it came down to the wire, Orochimaru was there. He is a pig-headed, amoral, cruel, vain, devious leader with so few redeeming qualities it hurts, but he also had never failed to uphold his end of a deal. Without him, Zabuza and Haku would still be under threat, and Ryuishi would have caved.

Maybe he did it to save himself, maybe he did it in search of vengeance, and he was probably using her, but that's alright. She knew that. The dangers were consensual between the two of them, fully acknowledged and accepted. Yet it will always remain that Orochimaru stuck by his deals, and she will not forget that.

"Ryuu-sama!" comes a petite, familiar voice, and the door adjoining the room is thrown open. Milky skin and aquamarine eyes distract her, and Ryuishi feels the face slacken in surprise as the a group of sound genin peek around the corner, herded by an exuberant Misaki.

The brothel owner is dressed to the nines, and she rushes through with quick, tiny steps, her hands a-flutter and her eyes sparkling with tears.

"You were supposed to be in Otogakure!" Ryuishi proclaims, because that was the fucking plan if things went south. Obviously the Hokage didn't mention an entire Okiya worth of girls under arrest, so Ryuishi had assumed that they had gotten away. She was pretty sure that was a bargaining chip that wouldn't go unmentioned.

She has time to flinch back as those fluttering hands find themselves on her body, fearlessly inspecting her. Haku makes some sound of protest in his throat, but Misaki snaps her eyes over to him, cooing and fluttering anew.

"I volunteered to come back while the other girls settled in. Nana-san is currently attending classes along with a good portion of the workers, and he can lead things while I am away, but when I heard the Rakki Ryu would need a handmaiden, naturally I couldn't ignore it-" she chirps, pulling up Ryuishi's shirt shamelessly, sighing over the fresh red skin stretched over her side.

Ryuishi goggles at her. "Handmaiden?"

"But of course," Orochimaru chimes from the doorway, smug. "It would be unseemly for you to not have an attendant. You will need assistance, especially in your fragile state."

Ryuishi balks at the implication, because she is not a noble lady or a fucking helpless child, she's a grown ass woman, and Misaki doesn't actually cut the requirements for a handmaiden, despite her skill with fashion and clever wording.

Then again, if Zabuza is supposed to be a liaison from Kiri, and she's going to play the political side of things, then there are certain rules that need to be followed in public. While Ryuishi is pretty certain that people could give less of a fuck about her personal life, it's very suspicious if a ninja from Kirigakure and one of the founders

of Otogakure spend so much time together unchaperoned. That's the sort of shit the noble courts would love to hold against her, and her acceptance in Oto is tenuous at best. Essentially, in the eyes of the royal courts, she's Orochimaru's little pet project, and he has her under control. If she fucks that up, he loses face, and that shit matters. Kinda.

She supposes it's only fair, since he has to act a certain way in front of the public, and many of the people who know of their involvement (which is not many) assumed she was taming him for her own use. Sort of fucked up when she thinks about it, that the polar opposites of the spectrum believe essentially the same thing, only with role reversals.

Then it strikes her, the important implications.

"Wait, when you say assistance..." She hesitates, dreading the answer.

"You will wear the formal robes befitting your station," Orochimaru confirms, and she groans out loud. She hates many-layered robes, though the Rice Country's robes are at least far better than the Kiri Juni-hitoe, which weighs about a billion pounds. Instead some strange bastardization between a Hanfu, Yukata, and Western ball gown cropped up in its place, and while it may be better, it's still restrictive and far too ornate.

Her only solace is that if she is forced into them, Zabuza and Haku will have to suffer alongside her to uphold the good image they are trying to present.

"Oh, and child," Orochimaru adds, the door almost closed.

She blinks, and she sees a warning in those gold eyes. The feeling of giddiness drops inside of her, and she focuses on him completely.

"Do remember you have your part to play," he reminds her smoothly, and she huffs.

She's not likely to forget it.

Sarutobi Hiruzen stares out at the darkened sky and the bright lights of Konoha, and he thinks that in all his fantastical imaginings of his students coming home, he never imagined them coming home quite like this.

For once, he feels every single second of his sixty-nine years of age. Even more than that, he feels the weight of centuries on his shoulders, as every secret or decision he had hid was thrust back in his face only hours earlier by a student he thought would never come home.

He runs his hand across his face, and he wonders what he has always wondered: if he is a good Hokage, a good shinobi, and a good man. If he can be any one of those things without excluding the others.

He knows he has had his failures in life. He has made choices he regrets, and they haunted him in the night. But he never expected for one of the students he raised like his own children to throw those failures back in his face. It had been years since he had seen Tsunade, and he had always wondered what it would be like if she came back. He had wondered what Orochimaru could have been if he had less ambition.

There comes a knock at the door, and he turns his attention away from the window, staring at the entrance to his office. The warm wood does not seem as homely and comforting as it did the day before, but weighs like chains around him.

"Come in," he commands, and the door creaks open, Kakashi entering, followed by his young kōhai. Both are sources who are experts on the subject that needs to be discussed.

Wordlessly, Sarutobi faces the two, and silence reigns for a moment. He thinks that this whole time they were wrong. They should have

provided with honest hearts, they should have upheld the Will of Fire, because they could have had her at one point. Yet now... now they made the same fatal mistake that Kiri had once made.

You cannot change the tides or stop the sea, he thinks tiredly. You must learn to work with it.

"It seems," he announces to the room at large, "that I have made a grave error in judgement."

He lets his admission hang in the air for a while, and he sighs, long and forlorn. He is an old man, and he is tired. He did what he thought was best, but it seems that in this new world, he is simply a relic of an older age, part of a generation born when control needed to be ironclad and one proved their strength on the battlefield alone.

"I can only hope that you two can repair what I cannot," he states wistfully.

"Sir?" Kakashi prompts.

"Watanabe Ryuishi is the registered co-founder of Otogakure," he says wearily. "And she works side by side with my one-time student Orochimaru, the recognized Otokage."

At another time, the reaction may have been comical, the way Kakashi seems to have been struck across the face by some invisible force. However, it is tempered greatly by the stoic blankness that crosses Tenzō's face when Orochimaru is mentioned, and the sweat that breaks on his brow when he remembers his time in that lab.

"How...?" Kakashi breathes. His mind races because he should stop being shocked, stop being surprised, but he can honestly say he did not see this one coming.

"Loopholes in the noble laws. It's not often one can pay the reparation price on their crimes, but the profits of the Land of Rice

are rumored to be extraordinary, and Orochimaru seems to have used a small amount to bury his sins. As for her, we all know that we all count as wanted ninja somewhere. Kakashi, your bounty in Kumo and Iwa are things of legend in and of themselves. As long as she was free of crimes in Rice, and she proved herself valuable, she was free to start anew, and only Kiri could demand her rightful return. It seems, however, that the new Mizukage is more interested in buying her favour, as Momochi Zabuza has been reinstated in the Kirigakure ranks as a long term jailer to an exiled native," he explains tiredly, having confirmed a few rumors.

"But... when?" Kakashi asks, and here the Hokage shakes his head, staring out the window once more.

"I wonder that as well. It seems that while we thought we were winning, they were running circles around us the whole time. I believe that those first few years after her defection, during the blackout in Kirigakure, he had taken her in. Perhaps even before that, when the Sannin broke up after the defeat of Hanzo," he hums, and Kakashi clenches his fist.

"She was-"

"A child, a veteran, and probably too clever by far. Someone who had just lost everything she had known, and was afraid and alone. She was perfect prey for Orochimaru to bend to his will," Sarutobi theorises. "However, it seems that she was clever enough to create tricks of her own. She is not the perfect subordinate, and I would say that even as a pupil she is lacking. As she grew, however, she may have covered areas that Orochimaru missed. A carefully controlled and coerced collaborator, one he had a hand in shaping to better suit him."

It may be on a level she herself does not entirely recognize, the Hokage thinks. Such is the subtlety of Orochimaru's manipulations. Care when she needed it, and swift, merciless punishment when she failed. Rewards and praise when she pleased him. In return, he coveted her, a troublesome youth that he raised. He grew fond of

her, and she grew into her own, enough to match wits with him, to cover the areas he missed.

I have made mistakes, Hiruzen thinks. I have my regrets, and I will face them. Orochimaru came back, not alone, but with his wayward teammate to recover a wounded woman in enemy territory. The child I saw with ambition and cruelty in his eyes may remain callous, but he is no longer uncaring. He has toiled in the world, and he has grown.

"But," Kakashi protests, because he knows her, and she... she-

Red blood and a caved in side, slurred words from lips painted red with blood. "It's 'kay," she gurgles, and then she screams because they are rolling her on her side, and she closes her eyes, and for a month she does not wake.

"But she isn't Orochimaru," the Hokage says. "She has been influenced by him, and we have greatly underestimated her as a whole. I fear her actions in retribution for our own, the choices she may make if he is allowed to convince her. Yet she is... she carries compassion for those she chooses, and she has chosen more than one from Konoha."

Sarutobi knows that Orochimaru has come to enact his vengeance. He is not ignorant, but he also knows that those who are guilty must atone for their deeds, not the village as a whole.

"I ask you now not to handle her as an asset. She knows our strength, and our might. We can assume she knows our production and manufacturing value, keeps records on our dealings. I ask you to show her that Konoha can do more than what it has done. That the Land of Fire has more value than just what she has seen, and what lies in fists and figures," the old man asks.

He closes his hazel eyes, and he feels torn, because he had thought for so long that all but one of his students were lost to him, yet for the first time in twenty years, they will soon all be within the village.

There will be shows of power and strife, subterfuge and bloodshed, but was there anything else in a ninja's life?

"Hokage-sama," says Tenzō timidly. "I don't understand."

"She reached out to Konoha when all she knew was the cold of Kirigakure, the violence of war, and the machinations of Orochimaru. She has no reason not to move against us, no reason but the people she chose," he clarifies, and Tenzo begins to understand.

The way they had controlled her before was through her desire for human interaction, and the bonds she created. Those same fragile bonds were all that held her from Orochimaru's grasp, and the reaching hands of Kiri.

The pressure grows, because the woman they have known for years-Ryuishi who snorted when she laughed, and sang while she cooked. Ryuishi who made inappropriate jokes and cursed far worse than any sailor-has moved up. She has gone from an asset to the village, to a person who could shift power balances entirely.

And all that kept her from abandoning Konoha was a tenuous friendship with two awkward, emotionally-stunted men, and one blond little boy.

Ah, Tenzō thinks. I suppose it's a good thing that senpai didn't enter them in the upcoming Chuunin Exams.

It has been a very long time since Momochi Zabuza has seen Ryuishi dressed in proper robes. And to be entirely honest, he doesn't think that he has ever witnessed her in the action of being dressed in them, or prepared as the oiran of her Okiya once were. She never seemed to dress up much after the academy, excluding rare practices where she would show up late to training, still clad in her kimono and geta, hurrying through the fog to the practice field. Once there she would change and they would start, but she never put it on afterwards.

He understands now that her not dressing formally was more a matter that she could not put on the proper garments without assistance, nor would she probably wish to.

He scratches his bare stomach idly, irritated by the fabric tied around his waist. He managed to lose the overly floppy robe top and jacket somewhere, but the traditional Kiri pinstripe Hakama style pants remain. He doesn't actually mind them, because they are loose and non-constraining. He might actually prefer them to his usual pants, but the price-

Zabuza stops and belatedly realizes that he could have probably afforded them, or rather, she could have. It just never occurred for him to try.

The woman helping her dress cinches the belt of fabric around Ryuishi's waist, and he wonders how uncomfortable that must be, with the oversized knot and restricting dress.

She looks the part, no doubt about it. With her black hair straightened and tied into a low, loose ponytail, adorned with a vibrant tsumami kanzashi on one side, and dressed in the noble robes of Rice Country, she looks nothing like the dangerous kunoichi he knows her to be. Her neck scar is tactfully covered up with silk ribbon, and the long billowing sleeves hide her scarred knuckles, just as the dress hides her legs. Even her face seems changed, softened in places and sharper in others.

"Fucking Hanfu," Ryuishi grouses. "Drowning in fabric over here. Like twenty pounds of bullshit in my hair."

"Ryuu-sama," Misaki chides. "You know you look lovely."

"You usually enjoy dressing up, and this is the most dressed up I've ever seen you," adds Haku, who kicks his legs, thumbing through a textbook idly. The boy cleans up well, and he could swap places with any daimyo's child at any time, but Zabuza isn't surprised. The Yuki are a noble clan, after all.

"I know, but I have to get my bullshit fuckery out before Orochimaru comes back. He'll be a pissy little dick if I start cursing up a storm in public. Gotta get this shit out then keep it on lock," she informs them, and Zabuza snorts. There is little chance she makes it through an hour without dropping a curse word, let alone a whole day. If she manages it, he'll wear his Happi coat.

She looks at him through the mirror, and her eyes are exaggerated and fierce, mimicking Orochimaru's. Zabuza would be angry at the little mark of possessiveness, but the dark lines meld in with her dark eyes, and she looks more feline, or even vulpine, then serpentine.

Her painted lips turn downward in a pout, and she skulks as her self proclaimed handmaiden does... *something* to the tips of her hair, leaving it a smooth black waterfall that cascades down her back.

"Look, Zabuza, if you think I won't kick your ass in this, you are wrong," she threatens, and he grins in a goading manner beneath his mask. He'd like to see her try.

"Can you even lift you arms above your head?" he asks, and she bares her teeth at him.

"If you two begin to wrestle, I believe the implication that Mist and Sound are doing the same will be made by our watchers," Haku informs them both, kicking his feet in the air.

Ryuishi settles back down with a pout, and Zabuza sinks back into his seat again. This preparation thing is taking too long, and both of them are used to filling up any downtime they have with spars. What else would they do?

The fact that Ryuishi can't really come up with any other ideas than scheming and fighting to fill up her spare time sort of sets off warning flags inside her head. That's not really a good sign, and she thinks that she should probably get a hobby or something. She's pretty sure she used to have those.

Thinking about it, she's come a pretty long way from who she used to be in her past life. Hell, she's leagues away from who she used to be in Kiri.

She looks in the mirror, and she sees a warped image of who she used to be staring back at her. The tiny girl who was malnourished and underfed, fresh from her first tour of duty. The one who ran her fingers across her doll-like features and kissed her youth goodbye as she painted dark lines of black paint across her face. She was broken pieces then, held by fragile seams, all jagged edges and sharp corners.

Then she was a teenager, staring at herself from the floor of her empty house. She was still growing, with fresh scars written across her skin. Her long hair was tangled and free, and she was fresh from the beach, but loneliness shone in her soul.

Now she's a woman grown, and she isn't in the springtime of her youth, but the summer of her life. She is poised and there is a sense of surety and grace that wasn't there before. The pieces don't shine through as much, and the loneliness has faded with company and time. She doesn't know who she is right now, like she didn't know who she was back then. It's only after she will be able to say what it is she really became.

Or something like that, anyway.

Misaki steps away from her, and she groans, finally able to move once more. Doing her stretches this morning has left her feeling languid and relaxed after going so long without them, and she never realized how stiff she was until she left the hospital and reality came back to her.

She proceeded to have a miniature anxiety attack and not eat before crashing to bed fairly early, only to wake up sometime in the middle of the night. She was sorely tempted to sneak around, but this wasn't her house, and it wouldn't do for her to be accused of something

unseemly. Well, even more unseemly than hiding the fact she was a foreign power, but whatever.

She rises to her feet, and she reaches her hands above her head, relishing the feeling of being able to breathe freely once more. She lets her muscles strain and stretch for a long moment, feeling a shiver run down her spine that makes her physically have to shake it away.

"Alright, now. Tea?" she asks, because she didn't get enough this morning, and for all his faults, Orochimaru has mad good taste in tea. And fashion.

(Orochimaru is... sort of eccentric. If that wasn't already obvious.)

"Food," Zabuza states, rising as well. She casts an envious look at him from the corner of her eyes, because while she looks higher class than him, he basically had to swap some pants and he was good. She, on the other hand, had to go through an entire beauty regime. Also, he looks sort of like a badass with his Hakama pants and mask, Kubikiribōchō strapped on his back.

"Tea comes with snacks," she reminds him, sweeping ahead in rolling steps. Her hanfu trails a bit, but she looks like she's gliding across the ground. She knows she does because she spent days being taught how to get that exact effect when she was younger.

Wordlessly, Haku rises as well, picking his book up absentmindedly. Ryuishi leads the group, including Misaki, through the rooms to where the tearoom is. She feels like some sort of ridiculous noble lady, leading her entourage through her far-too-fancy home so they can eat a billion course meal and dip their dainty little hands in bowls of water while talking about the new winter fashions or some shit.

She's passing through the entrance hall of their suite (and isn't that fucking wild, an entrance hall in a fucking fancy as shit hotel for politicians), her slippers soundless as she skates across the floor, and her long sleeves fluttering behind her. Her posture is upright

(mostly because the robes don't allow for slouching) and her hair flutters gently behind her. She has this walking like a lady shit down.

"NEE-SAN!"

This time, Ryuishi doesn't even think twice. She whirls, and the fabric of her robes go fluttering when she lifts her arms in invitation. At the door, two frantic doormen are promptly bypassed in a single leap.

In a movie, it would be the super slow motion embrace with crashing waves and sunsets and a lot of other nonsense, but in real life, he scampers across the floor and kicks off the ground before leaping into her arms. Even though he is far bigger than the four year old she used to hold on her hip, she's tempted to just keep him in her grasp, holding him. She's wanted to squeeze him like this since she first saw him in the Land of Rivers.

He squeezes her tight, and she returns the favor with a laugh, peppering kisses across his head.

"Miss me, Sunshine?" she coos.

"Says the lady who's drowning me in kisses!" Naruto fires back, scrunching her tight against him as his feet dangle off the ground.

"Disgusting," murmurs somebody, and she's pretty sure it's Sasuke, but it could have been Sakura. Who knows.

"Naruto," Kakashi calls, still carefully waiting near the entrance. "Get back here. There's protocol."

She knows that there is, in fact, actual diplomatic nonsense going down, but Orochimaru isn't here to ensure it, and if Kakashi is going to try and cage her in, then he can get right back on her shitlist. They had their little spat, and if he doesn't trust that she is trying very hard with what she has, then he can eat a dick.

"Fuck protocol," Naruto mumbles as he wiggles out of her arms, dropping down to the ground. He grasps tight to her skirt, and he spies Misaki, who smiles mischievously at him from behind the group.

He beams, and Ryuishi cannot resist the urge to ruffle his hair.

"Well, I'm pretty sure protocol is already broken. What do you say to joining me and the other... diplomats... for tea?" she invites smoothly, and the face Sasuke makes at the word 'diplomats' is a thing of beauty. She wishes she had a camera to record it for posterity. Totally posterity and not blackmail.

Kakashi hesitates. "Is that as a... diplomat, or as a-" he begins, but Sakura speaks over his unsure mumbling.

"We would be delighted, Ryuishi-sama," she tells her with a bow.

Good, Ryuishi thinks, drawing Naruto closer. They can settle things there.

AN: Alright, so some of the charges have gone off. Thing is, Ryuishi has planted bombs all over the fucking place. Bombs after bombs after bombs. Secrets and secrets and secrets. We see politics beginning, mechanization starting, and years and years of planning beginning to show. Also, if you are like 'We didn't see Tsunade talk to Sarutobi' Just wait. Her initial wrath is a baby thing compared to upcoming chapters. Also, Jiraiya and Gaara and holy shit, team seven isn't in the chuunin exams. So much shit is happening. Welcome to the chaos arc. Nothing makes sense, everything is crazy, who knows what is going on?

Shout out to my lurkers, favoriters, and followers. LOUD SCREAMING FOR MY REVIEWERS. AHHHHH. FOR YOU.

Seventeen blessings on my beta Enbi, who deserves sunshine and happiness. Without her help, these chapters would not

have been written.

**Question: Why was Tsunade looking at Ryuishi so strangely?
OR What sort of celebration did Orochimaru throw the second
he was alone? OR What the fresh hell was team seven thinking
when they saw Ryuishi all dressed up?**

In Which the Truth Pops Up

I do not own Naruto

Haruno Sakura feels that, perhaps, Naruto's sister is something straight out of a fairytale.

Not a two days ago she was sickly, pushed to exhaustion by the mere presence of others inside her hospital room. There were dark lines beneath her eyes, and her breath wheezed every time she inhaled or exhaled. Now, she's standing tall and proud, and to Sakura's eyes, she looks like a queen, coming right from the pages of a bedtime story. Her purple and white Rice Country robes are resplendent in color and quality, draped along her body like a well-fitting glove, and her black hair is sleek and straight in a way that would make Ino drool.

She isn't sure how it has come to pass, or why, but the complications of her health seem to have taken a turn for the better, and... and Sakura really isn't sure just who Naruto's sister is. No missing-nin gets this sort of treatment.

Sakura's never seen anything so extravagant in her *life* . When she went to training this morning, she thought they might run another message to an outpost, or some D-ranks, but this is... *insane* . Their entrance made her feel under-dressed, not to mention the tea room they are all sitting in. The cushion Sakura is on must be worth more than her entire outfit, and the tea set looks to be some sort of artisan crafted piece from Waterfall.

Sakura sits in her seiza, hoping she makes it look half as good as the handmaiden behind Watanabe-san, let alone the woman herself. Beside her, Sasuke and Kakashi do the same. Naruto elects to ignore decorum, and unlike Zabuza-san -who looks the picture of a fierce shinobi with one leg bent at the knee and folded inward, the

other propped up to rest his arm on- Naruto looks like a buffoon, already reaching into one of the snack bowls.

"Nice," he comments in the quiet. "The senbei have little designs on them. Fancy."

Sakura feels the her anger spike, because Naruto is making them look so *bad* . She knows Sasuke shares this sentiment, because he tugs the moron back down beside them.

The blond gives them both a withering glare, his mouth and right hand full of rice crackers. If he could yell at them while chewing, Sakura knows he would, but that's one bad manner he mostly doesn't have. Still, his crunching on the crispy treat is so loud that even with his mouth closed it fills the room.

Sakura tries to communicate with her eyes alone, but inside her head she is screaming at him. Can't he read the atmosphere? It's so fancy here! Has he seen the garden outside the screen door? There's a koi pond and a garden Ino would cry over, not to mention the fountain? Isn't he aware of what is going on?

"Try the Youkan," Watanabe-san offers politely, pouring them cups of tea with a serene grace. "The Amanatto is also very good, as is the wagashi, but if you are looking for something savory, there is also nikuman and gyōza."

"Isn't that a bit much for tea?" asks Kakashi-sensei, and Sakura wants to smack him. Questioning the hostess is rude. Sure, it's a bit of a spread, but she's going above and beyond the call of duty! Look at how stylishly and beautifully everything is presented, contrasting elegantly with the carefully minimalist yet cozy design of the room! Look at the sleek grain on the designs standing out on this table, perfectly stained to be aesthetically pleasing in their simplicity and yet ornate enough for a noble! Can he not smell the tea, a perfectly dried green with hints of jasmine, a careful balance between stimulating and relaxing?!

"Yah, it's a bit much, but these are all staples in the Land of Rice and I'm pretty sure that the Otokage wants to shove his culture and wealth into Konoha's face," Watanabe admits crassly, settling the teapot down with tranquil calm.

Beside her, Sasuke chokes on his gyōza.

"The Otokage, who-along with you-founded a village," Kakashi says dryly, and this time Naruto joins Sasuke in his choking, and Sakura spills the tea she just picked up over her fingers. The scalding liquid makes her hiss when it touches her skin.

"Surprise," Ryuishi says with a smile. "I'm both a wanted criminal and a legitimate foreign dignitary. Apparently, Zabuza is too."

Kakashi looks like the statement physically pains him, his lone eye scrunching up in the corner.

Ryuishi takes a careful sip from her tea, and Sakura thinks that her scars are well hidden by the silk. It's a clever, useful thing to note. Never judge by appearance.

"You know, Hatake-san, since you've been treating with her so long, I suppose you also count as a diplomat now," Haku states genially from his seat, delicately taking a small bite of the sweet jelly on his plate. Sakura can only hope she looks half as pretty as him right now.

The comment succeeds in making the lines on the masked man's face even deeper, which may have been its intended purpose. Few people carry a grudge as well as Haku.

Naruto finishes hacking up rice cracker crumbs all over the floor, and he whips his head up to face his sister, his blue eyes wide and his expression demanding.

"Are you a princess? A missing ninja princess?" he asks, his volume increasing.

"No," Watanabe-san (sama?) answers immediately.

"In a way," chimes in the woman sitting behind her.

Watanabe- *sama* turns and levels a powerful glare at the woman, her lips twisted into a scowl.

"Orochimaru is a Kage and you are actually a legitimate founder of a Hidden Village," Kakashi says in a false calm, his tone flat. "Alright, while we're all here, what else?"

"Yah! What else, Misaki-nee?!" Naruto insists, and Sakura takes a better look at the woman sitting behind Watanabe-sama. She looks beautiful in her kimono, and Sakura would have never guessed she was a prostitute.

"Your handmaiden is actually a prostitute who helped raise Naruto, go on," Kakashi-sensei encourages calmly. Sakura worries about him for a moment, because there is a vein on his temple that looks like it's throbbing quite painfully.

"Misaki," Watanabe states in an equal, warning calm.

"Haku!" Naruto tries, knowing that the battle is lost in that arena.

"She's also the Rakki Ryuu, and Zabuza-san is the Odayaka Oni," the young man says breezily. The names go right over her head, but Naruto literally shrieks, and he continues shrieking as he turns back to look at his sister and the swordsman.

"Haku!" Watanabe reprimands, and her tone is so threatening that Sakura shrinks back.

"She has hands in most production and trade," Zabuza states in a deadpan, reaching out for for the gently steaming white buns.

"Zabuza!" Ryuishi protests over Naruto, who hasn't taken a breath in yet, but somehow is continuing his screaming.

"This is good," Sakura hears Kakashi-sensei mumble to himself.
"Like a wound, you have to rip the kunai out before you can bandage it."

"Is this real?" Sakura wonders to herself quietly.

Sasuke turns toward her, and usually she'd be pleased as punch, but the surreal quality of the moment is ruining it for her. "I'm fairly certain everything this team is involved in is reality protesting its existence," Sasuke informs her seriously. She slaps his arm hard enough for him to grit his teeth because it's a rude thing to say, but she doesn't actually deny that there is a good possibility that it's true.

"UZUMAKI NARUTO, IF YOU DON'T QUITE SCREAMING RIGHT NOW I WILL TAN YOUR HIDE, SO HELP ME!" Ryuishi roars, and like magic, Naruto stops. Sure his face is red from holding his noise in, and he looks like a kettle boiling over, but he's quiet. Haku is as well, and he seems to be regretting his earlier comment, sweating nervously on his cushion.

Watanabe-sama takes a deep breath in, visibly composing herself. Her hand reaches out, and she takes a sip from her tea, carefully drawing the moment out. When she places the cup on the table once more, she seems bolstered by the liquid, her fierce calm set back in place and her voice even once more.

"That," she says slowly, "was far more than I wanted them to know."

"But still not everything," Zabuza-san mentions calmly, and she spares him a truly frightening glare, which he ignores.

"You're the Rakki Ryuu?" Naruto blurts, unable to hold himself back, and Sakura watches as both Haku and the now named Misaki seem to slink down in their seats, avoiding her eyes.

"It's a very long story, and it's very complicated," Watanabe-sama deflects.

"I think we deserve to hear it," Kakashi-sensei replies, and she casts her eyes outside, her jaw clenched tight.

"Do you?" she says venomously.

"Maybe I don't," Kakashi amends quietly. "But what have they done to deserve your distrust?"

Sakura holds her breath, because the woman's eyes flicker around the room at a rapid pace, and her resolve seems to waver. Her hand tightens into a fist before drawing back in her sleeve, the rustling of silk filling the room.

What they do not see is the helplessness that Ryuishi shelters inside herself. They don't know the heaviness of her tongue, or the dryness of her mouth. She doesn't want them to know, because if they know, then they might realize what she knows. They would see her, and they would hate her.

"I can't," she pleads. "Not everything."

Because even she doesn't acknowledge everything. She still represses and ignores, and she compartmentalizes until each piece grows a life of its own inside her head and tears at her from the inside out. She's toxic to herself, and she doesn't want the others to know how poisonous she is.

"Then say what you can," Zabuza says, and it is almost gentle.

Ryuishi is afraid in that moment. She looks out to see all those eyes watching her, and she knows that it's not okay that she knows their stories, while nobody knows hers. She knows she's manipulative and damaged and sort of fucked up.

"Where would I start?" she asks, and she means it to sound sarcastic, but it isn't. It sounds lost, and whoop, here she is, feeling detached from the situation, like it's far away.

"Kiri," says Zabuza, and she winces. Kiri is... Kiri was...

"It's always cold in Kiri," she says, because she knows that's true at least. She doesn't remember one sunny day in that asscrack. "There was never enough food, and everyone was too busy being dicks to each other to do anything. Nobody gave a damn about the corpses in the alleyways, or the kids walking like skeletons in the fog. I thought that was fucked up. I thought the whole system was fucked up."

It's dangerous, but she feels old bitterness on her tongue, the taste of rice gruel and injustice. She could be scared and sad, she could be angry and violent, but she just feels bitter. Yes, she fears losing everything, because she knows what it's like. She's not sorry, and she's also super sorry, but doubly tired of feeling that way. She's a goddamn fucking mess.

"I used to think I was mad because it was a military dictatorship, but you know what? That's wrong. I was mad because Kiri was shitty, and Kiri was cruel, and nobody was stepping up to do a damn thing to change it. I decided if it could be done, I would do it," she states, and she lifts her head. She knows her sins, she never ignored them. She's taken responsibility every goddamn day since trying to fix the mess.

"Man, so much shit went down in Kiri. I was gonna be a prostitute like my mom but then some pedo tried to nab me in an alleyway, and when I killed him, they saw potential. Isn't that fucked up? That they wouldn't have stopped it, but they would recruit me after I killed my assaulter? It's almost as fucked up as the time Zabuza killed everybody in our class, then attempted to kill me. Almost as fucked up as sending a seven-year-old genin who specialized in mid-range combat and genjutsu out in a war with a frontal assault unit, but that was the village, and most the people thought it was okay. They never questioned if what they were doing was fucked up, or they never acted on their knowledge that it was wrong. That's fine though, Kiri would have killed them if they had," she spits, and it feels like

something that's been building up inside her is leaking out. Like air from a balloon, or fire from an explosion.

"It's why I forgive my unit, because they don't know better, and they are my heart and soul. I need that unit like the air I breathe. It's the only thing I have, that keeps me safe and warm. When everything else is blood and fire and fear, the unit is home. I regret not trying to convince them of my thoughts everyday, but I was so afraid, because I needed my unit, and Kiri could take them from me."

She laughs, and alright, she's probably a bit more angry than she needs to be, but damn, she has had so many nightmares about this. Orders coming for Kisame and Zabuza but not her. She wanted to tell them, but they had every reason to inform superiors and she was scared of involving them.

"I'm pretty sure I started going crazy, and the unit was the only thing that was keeping me afloat. On one hand, I was working so hard to help those people I saw, to tell them that Kiri was wrong, and they weren't trash or garbage. That people were people, no matter what blood they had. On the other, I was killing people off on the front lines like flies, desperate to stay alive and keep my unit safe."

"Ryuishi," Zabuza interrupts, but she ignores him. He wanted this. *He wanted this and he can have it*, because she is tired of carrying it alone.

"So I lose my mind, somewhere in between trying to figure out morality and loyalty and love and a bunch of other esoteric concepts. After a couple of years, I come home, and you know what? Some shinobi decided the brothel that my mother worked in was a great place to get drunk and brawl. I come home, and there is rubble in the place where I grew up, littered with bodies. One of them is hers, her head smashed in like a rotten pumpkin, and nobody cares because it was just some Oiran. Just some akasenko and lowlives. I look down at the battered remains of the woman who used to smell like cinnamon, the lady who taught me how to walk in geta and tie an obi, and just like that, I break," she admits.

The room is deathly quiet, and she breathes in. The garden outside is truly beautiful, a part of her observes idly. The wisteria is masterfully pruned.

(She feels so dead inside.)

"I lose it, because I can't fix Kiri. I can't even fix myself, but I can't leave the people behind. They deserve better, everyone deserves better, and they can get it somewhere else. They mean something. I ask them if they want to leave, and they say yes, so I help them do that. For the great power of having common decency, they call me Rakki Ryuu, but all I know is that I rip my heart out as I say my last goodbyes, and I stumble as they take vengeance on Kiri for every alleyway assault, every pincushioned corpse in the trash and tiny body in the gutter. For overwork, subjugation, and plain murder. But, get this, as I try and leave, my unit commander comes after me. He calls me a liar and a traitor, and he tries to straight up kill me, because that's Kiri. That's what that village used to be," she spits, and sweet infant angels, she is so salty about that. To this day, she knows she will hold a flaming grudge in her heart for the older generation of Water Country for teaching that shit.

"Ryuishi-" Kakashi tries, but she pins him with her eyes. He doesn't get to interrupt her. He practically begged for this shit and he can take it. She's... tired. Tired of trying to be everything everybody wants her to be, and ending up nothing at all. Tired of being judged and questioned and fighting at every turn, tired of being tired.

"And you know who was there when I was alone and crazy? When I couldn't tell the difference between reality and hallucination? *Orochimaru* . Yes, he's amoral and kind of a dick. Yes he's done some fucked up things, and yes, whatever else you have to say. But I was alone, I was in need, and he fixed me. Not my unit, not my village, not the daimyo or the system, *Orochimaru* . He made me well enough to get back up and keep helping people, finding ways to make sure that shit like what happened in Kiri didn't happen again, and kids that could have grown up like me and my unit had better options," she states.

Her hand fiddles with her cup, and she looks down again, slowing her rapid-fire pace. She's still conflicted and anxious. She's still scared and angry, and she still hates talking about this. She's a big fat mess, and she suspects she might always be one. She's not exactly okay with that, but she's beginning to understand that she's not ever going to stop cleaning up the mess she is. There won't be a single day where she isn't picking up pieces of herself, and it's been so exhausting. She just wants to be done.

"In the end, I build myself up, and I keep trying because it's the only option I have. I scheme and I plan, and sometimes it works out. I keep trying to find a way to do things better, and I'm not even sure what better is. Maybe I don't have the right to attempt to control so much, and maybe I don't know where the line is between good and evil. Maybe I'm justifying nonsense and spewing crazy, and there is a lot I am editing out of this story, but damn, if I had to tell it all we would be here for weeks. So that's that. The Rakki Ryuu, the Kiri no Ningyo, Watanabe Ryuishi, they are all the same person doing their damndest to figure it all out, keep their shit together, and keep the people they love safe," she finishes.

It doesn't feel good to have said it all. It doesn't feel relieving or safe or warm, she just feels sort of empty. She's a facade of a person, and she didn't even brush up on half the shit in her life. Like, this was the fucking clean version. She only brushed on the fact that all her friends have tried to kill her, and she didn't even touch the fact that she's been hunted for years. She never said a word about the isolation, the loneliness, the anxiety, grief, and torment. Hell, she didn't bring up her old life at all, or how almost everybody has tried to use her, and she can practically hear the room around her forming opinions.

She feels hollow, not like the Void, but like the moment right before you fall asleep, when there are no thoughts at all. When there is only that weariness taking over, and the cessation of self.

At least, she thinks, I didn't cry.

Because man, at least she has that. She can go to her grave knowing that she did not fuck up her really nice makeup by crying. For all she feels hollow and gross and sort of regrets telling them already, at least she didn't bring tears into this.

She hears a snuffle, and she looks up.

Apparently, she would not have been out of place if she was crying, because the occupants of the tea room are caught between sending her meaningful looks she can't really interpret and bawling openly.

"Hey," she starts awkwardly. She takes in Naruto's messy sobbing, Sakura's rapid sniffing, and Haku's discreet but repetitive eyes swipes with guilt in her heart. Behind her, Misaki is probably managing delicate, beautiful tears, because she can hear it, but oh Vishnu, she feels guilty.

"Hey now," she tries to soothe, too far away to pat them on the back. "Stop that you guys, it's really alright-"

"It isn't alright," Sasuke snaps at her, and his voice cracks so bad in the middle of his sentence it hurts her ears. He's blinking pretty fast, and seems to be swallowing a lot as well. "None of that was alright."

"No, just... um... try the nikuman, kid, it's pretty good," she says, gently pushing the food over, because food is always helpful, right?

"Stop t-t-trying t-to deflect," Haku stutters out, and Ryushi can't even look at him without feeling the need to comfort him and also wash her soul or something.

"Shhhh," she attempts. "Just... come here. I'll get some tissues and-"

"You're the one that need to be comforted!" Sakura protests, her little hand rubbing at her eye. It's both adorable and heart-wrenching.

Ryushi moves to protest, but she gets her mouth open and that's about it. She doesn't need to be comforted, the thought of it is

strange and mildly uncomfortable-

"Y uv oohh!" Naruto exclaims in a shuddering voice, taking a deep breath. She roughly translates that to an 'I love you,' which is always good to hear, but also confusing. She could be wrong, as she isn't fluent in crying child, but hey, whatever.

Meanwhile, Zabuza and Kakashi are giving her these looks and she isn't really sure how to interpret them, which is strange, because she's usually pretty good at it. All she knows is that they are pretty intense, and also maybe there is some jaw clenching of fist tightening or whatever, but it's fucked up and everything is weird.

Ryuishi has never regretted talking this much before. It resonates with her, because she feels like she messed up. She doesn't get it. There isn't an inkling of understanding there. Only the vague discomfort caused by kids crying, bone deep tiredness, and regret for opening her stupid fat mouth.

Kakashi sits there, and he watches her sit with her awkward, forced smile, and he wonders if this is the edited version, how she still manages to do anything at all. She sits alone in her heartbreak and bitterness, and she carries the weight of the world on her shoulders.

Eight years, he thinks. *Eight years I've known her, but at the same time I never really knew her at all.*

It's not a justification for her actions. It's not an appeal she's making, it's an explanation. How can she do what is right if she never knew what was right at all? How can she know things like trust or truth when there has been nothing but her, working toward her goals, alone?

I decided if it could be done, I would do it, she said. Somewhere, even as a child, she saw the hurt in others and she tried to make it stop, tried to take it away. She didn't expect help from anyone, not her teachers or family or teammates. It was just her, and she accepted that. Accepted that her village could kill her, could take her,

could tear her apart, but so long as the people she sheltered were safe, she was alright with that.

Ryuishi had been born, and she had accepted her death. Not quietly, not without a fight, but in a bid for something she considered greater than herself, and what she considered greater was almost everything else.

Adjacent to him, Kakashi doesn't notice Zabuza burning holes in her with his eyes alone, his hands clenched into fists. He knew the story, or most of it, but seeing her undervalue herself always manages to piss him off.

She's alive, and she's there, and she *means* something. More than anybody else she knows, she means something. She says the unit kept her afloat, but there would have never been a unit without her. There would have been two apprentices in a competition, repetitively following orders. Him and Kisame would have never had half as much as they did without her, because she... she let them be human. When Kirigakure told them to be tools, she wanted them to be themselves.

Without her, he would have known what it was like to be cared for, to know warmth in his ribs at the feel of cool hands. He wouldn't know how to laugh, or what safety felt like, surrounded by his unit. Hers were the only hands that reached out and touched for the sake of touch without pain, and her emotions let them know that what they were experiencing was alright.

To know that the whole time she was taking blows on the battlefield, she was also sheltering them from the village as well, it galls him. They could have helped. They could have-

He grits his teeth, because no, he doesn't know what would have happened. When she needed them most, when she shattered like an poorly tempered blade, they weren't there. *He* wasn't there. Why would they have been there before?

They failed her, and she feels like she's failed them.

"That s-s-story sucks!" proclaims a wet, stuffy voice, and Zabuza recognizes it as Naruto.

The child draws his sleeve across the bottom of his face, and he inhales, producing a truly awful noise. When he looks up, his eye are red and puffy, and still producing tears, but his teeth are gritted together in determination.

"W-when I w-was alone, you found me! W-when I needed h-help, you l-loved me!" he tells her, and her face falls.

"Maybe I was lying, or using you-" she starts, but the boy cuts her off before she can continue.

"Bullshit!" he interjects, and she looks startled. "N-no one can lie all the time!"

He sniffs once more, and his hands ball into fists by his side.

"I can't imagine... I can't imagine w-what it was like. Everything you just said was so screwed up, and I get it now, why you look so s-sad sometimes: it's because you *are* . Y-You're sad, and you're a-angry, and you're hurt. You're a big ball of s-stuff, and I can't... I can't go back in time and fix it. I can't change what you went through," he says slowly, stuttering on certain words.

"All I can do is get s-strong enough to make sure you n-never have to go through it again."

Ryuishi's face turns stone-like, but Zabuza finds himself agreeing with the boy. He can't change the past, but he can get stronger. He can grow powerful enough to keep her safe, to cut down and one else who thinks that they can mark her, or tear her down. Strong enough to bring back their wayward teammate, so they can have some peace.

"That's not your responsibility-" she tries, but once again she is cut off.

"You decided that if nobody else was, you would change things," Kakashi says calmly. "Which, while entirely controlling and manipulative, is along the same lines of making sure yet another traumatic event doesn't occur in your life."

The comment throws her, and her face morphs once more, this time into one of confoundment.

"To make sure that you won't be alone," murmurs Haku. "That if you slip, someone is there to catch you."

"To stop you from making friends with people who have tried to kill you," Sasuke adds on. Not because he feels obligated to do it, but because it seems like it needs to be pointed out. He may not be able to absolve the relationships she already established, but creating anymore on that principle seems like a bad decision.

A weary smile pulls at Ryuishi's lips. "That's sweet you guys, but I'll take care of it-"

"And we'll help," Sakura cuts in.

"Not even Izanagi c-created the earth alone," Misaki chokes, dabbing the tears from her eyes daintily. "Nobody s-should have to shoulder s-so much."

Zabuza stares at Ryuishi, and he thinks of her long sleep, her wounds, her tiredness, and her troubles. He thinks of all her faults and all her qualities, and he decides that he should have come to this decision earlier.

She goes to open her mouth once more-

"No," he tells her. No protesting, no fighting, no wordplay. "You're getting help."

Because he's not great at people stuff, but these people are. He's not perfect, and he can't cover every angle all the time, especially if he's going to start training again.

She's dug her own grave on this one. If she didn't want people interfering, or stepping up, or getting involved, than perhaps she shouldn't have done exactly the same thing.

There are flaws and problems, yes, but she's important. She's water, and there is no life without her.

Ryuishi closes her mouth, and she looks around the room once more. She can't tell if she's scared that people actually care, or if she's relieved. Actually, she's kind of emotionally drained, and she... she doesn't know. It doesn't feel right. It feels incredibly wrong, and they won't make it. They just won't.

"I'm not a good person," she reminds them, because it needs to be said.

"You're still a person," Naruto fires back, and he shines like the sun, radiant in his determination.

She breathes in, and she worries. She loves them more than she can describe, but even she realizes she's a mess. They have no idea what they are getting into when it comes to not only her, but the world of politics and subtleties. Words... words are easy and she... she-

-A knock interrupts them, and there is a flurry of young children wiping their eyes and taking their proper seats. It's as if everyone is eager to hide the activities that occurred within this room from the outside world, and Ryuishi is tired enough to let it slide without comment. She feels an itch in her chest, and she wants to forget this happened.

Misaki rises from behind her, and she makes her way towards the sliding doors with tiny steps as Ryuishi stares out at the garden,

letting her mind empty out. She stares at the verdant greenery interspersed with bright bursts of color, and she wonders how this could get any messier.

There are quiet murmurs at the door, and Misaki's sweet tone mixes with somebody else's. The door shuts once more, and Misaki smiles charmingly at the room.

"Ryuu-sama, your doctor is here," she announces to the room at large.

Ryuishi closes her eyes with a sigh as the whole room seems to remember all at once that she is not, in fact, in peak physical condition.

Of course it can get more complicated, she thinks to herself sarcastically. *Of course it can*.

"I distinctly remember telling you to remain away from stressors and take it easy," Senju Tsunade tells her, and Ryuishi grits her teeth, her hand clenched into a fist.

Having somebody fuck around inside your ribcage is strange and unsettling. Even if it's not actually the woman's hands, but specialized chakra, it feels awful. Things that aren't supposed to be moving are shifting around, and it feels like she's inhaled steam and smoke all at once.

"I did," Ryuishi hisses between her clenched teeth.

On the other side of the shoji screen (and seriously, why is that even there? Ryuishi isn't undressed or anything, noble decorum is weird) a voice speaks up to call her out.

"That's a lie," comes the deadpan voice of Sasuke, who seems to have recovered nicely for a punk who was on the verge of tears not fifteen minutes ago.

"She was pressured into revealing some traumatic experiences," chimes in Sakura's voice, and honestly. Take the children elsewhere, please.

"Many traumatic experiences," stresses Kakashi, and you know what, Ryuishi will knock this screen over and kick all of their asses-.

"Her life is really sad," adds Naruto unhelpfully.

She inhales deeply, and regrets it when the warm buzz of medical chakra swirls around something in her lungs. Sweet Bothica, the sensation is unpleasant.

"Yes, well, it would be even sadder if it included psychogenic blackouts and she began pleural effusion," Tsunade informs the room dryly, and Ryuishi squints at her, because she is not a doctor, but those words sound ominous.

"Fainting and fluid buildup in the lungs should be avoided," agrees Haku, and she knew it. She knew those sounded bad!

"All in favor of not letting our trusted diplomat and friend stress herself out?" Kakashi asks the room at large.

"Aye," says just about everybody at once, and she bares her teeth at them even though they can't see. She is a grown woman and she can (mostly) take care of herself.

"Delightful as the running commentary has been, you all are going to have to leave. Now. Her blood pressure has shot up six points in the last minute and a half alone," Tsunade informs them all sternly. Her tone brooks no argument from anybody at all, and there is a quiet procession of feet, followed by silhouettes on the screen. The last, and tallest of the group stands on the other side of the screen for a moment longer than the rest, casting his shadow on the thin white paper comfortingly.

"Just outside the door," Zabuza rumbles, and she can't help but smile to herself, relaxing in her seat.

"I'll meet up with you soon," she promises, and only after she gives her consent does he follow after the ragtag gang, sliding the door behind him closed with an audible click.

For a long moment, there is only the quiet sounds of the room, which Ryuishi relishes in. Everything has been hurried and rushed since she woke back up, ripe with tension and danger. She spent almost all of last night sending out missives and codes to her failsafes, assuring them all she was still alive. Not only that, but she had demanded the information she had missed out on during her little sleeping beauty stunt, and spent hours poring over it until her body gave out in the bed she was in.

She needs to know how the Akatsuki found her, and what they needed her for. She needs to know how the markets are doing, and how her populations are. There's so much she needs to keep track of, and for all their well-wishing, she doesn't trust anybody else to do it. Her body needs to quit being a little bitch and suck it up. She feels better than she has in months, maybe *years*. If she would stop occasionally getting dizzy or breathless, she would be fine.

"That last one, he was your teammate," Tsunade states, and it's not so much a question as it is an observation.

Ryuishi stares at the older woman through half-lidded eyes. The woman is certainly striking, with an ample bosom and curved figure. Fair skinned, fair haired, and powerful enough to smash her into last week, she would usually be right up Ryuishi's 'inappropriate crush' list, but for some reason, she isn't.

"Is that really the question you want to ask?" she fired back.

The woman pauses in her ministrations, the green energy around her hands flickering out around her palms. The buzzing sensation

leaves her innards, and she breathes freely, enjoying the time without it.

"You sent them out for a reason. I know how to keep my blood pressure under control, there wasn't any huge spikes," Ryuishi explains, fibbing just a bit. She has a hunch.

Amber eyes flick up at her, holding her own gaze, and Ryuishi is aware of her chances, but she remains unbothered by them. She's too tired, emotionally and physically, to play more games today.

"Straight to the point, eh?" Tsunade smirks, standing tall. "Not what I would have expected from a student of his."

"I'm not his student," Ryuishi states yet again.

"No, I don't think you are," Tsunade agrees thoughtfully. "I was in Otogakure, you see, and there were things there that a man like Orochimaru would never think to endorse. Sentimental things, cultural things, a sense of community. Orochimaru may be clever as hell, but he never saw the use of those."

Ryuishi eyes Tsunade, and she inclines her head, because yes, those were her additions, among various others. She accepts that.

Tsunade nods, as if confirming something to herself. "See what I don't get, is what changed his mind? Oh sure, I bet you're clever, but you aren't the smart in the ways he recognizes as smart."

Ryuishi waves her hand, and her sleeve tracks the movement of the appendage, drifting elegantly.

"See, in a way, you're right. I'm not great at science, or an insanely strong ninja," Ryuishi agrees. "However, I am fairly good at blurring lines."

Tsunade observes her carefully, and Ryuishi has no idea what her goal is. She's a woman caught between one really shady choice and

another equally grey option. For someone who works in absolutes, or at least, someone who likes idealist goals as much as Tsunade, it's a bad place to be.

"When you get down to it, Orochimaru is really all about entertainment and curiosity. He might say he's about progress and efficiency, and in his own way he is, but the reason he never did well with things like culture, sentiment, and community is no one ever made it understandable to him. When he asked why, people just rattled off some more sentiment," Ryuishi explains.

"So you blurred the lines," Tsunade states slowly, understanding. "You made it into something quantifiable, something he could study and interact with. Oto is just an experiment on a grand scale."

"I mean, on some level it is, but to me it's the work of a lifetime, so if we could not call it that I'd be pretty appreciative," Ryuishi drawls.

Tsunade looks her over again, and Ryuishi idly wonders how much a medic like her can tell about her life from the treatments she's been giving. Considering that she's had access to her medical history, Tsunade probably knows a lot as it is.

"Seems like a lot of your life works have a tendency of ending poorly," Tsunade comments lightly, and Ryuishi raises her brows. She has no idea what the woman is referencing, exactly, but it seems to be a lot of shade to be throwing at a stranger.

"Do you have a goal here, are you trying to figure me out by throwing questions and suspicion at me?" Ryuishi asks pointedly.

"Alright, I'll be even blunter. Do you have any idea what you are doing? You seem to be taking on several battles all at once, and the stress is quite literally draining you. I can't tell if you're more clever than all of us, or a madwoman," Tsunade says without flinching, and Ryuishi looks her dead in the eye.

"I like to think I have an idea," she lies smoothly.

Tsunade stares at her then, long and hard. If she were any less tired, Ryuishi might be intimidated, or scared, or aggravated, but she honestly is exhausted.

"There's no chance that you're staying away from stressors, is there?" Tsunade says blandly, and this, at least, makes her smile.

"Nope," she agrees. "Any chance you'll tell me what it is you were actually trying to learn?"

"Nope," Tsunade echoes, and the two of them stand there, at an impasse. It's vaguely unsatisfying.

The quiet returns, and Tsunade leans forward to shove the uncomfortable, warm energy inside her once again while Ryuishi tries to figure the angles out. She knows Tsunade is here because of Orochimaru's manipulations. Honest manipulations, but manipulations none the less. She also knows that Tsunade is smart enough to recognize what is going on, if she ever truly knew Orochimaru at all. Hell, if she spent any time with him at all. You don't have to understand him to realize he can sort of be a dick.

The healing session passes, and though she has lost her headache and her shortness of breath, Ryuishi is still wiped. Her hands are cold, despite the warm air, and she still hasn't drank enough caffeine to keep her going. She has mountains of data to go through still, and rumors to check up on. She also has Tsunade's motives to worry about now, and how they concern her.

"Get some rest," Tsunade tells her, standing straight, and she nods without really listening at all.

Tsunade seems to know that, though, because she doesn't just walk away. No, she walks toward the door, her heels clicking on the floor, and she throws it open without shame.

"She needs sleep," Tsunade tells the audience outside, and Ryuishi narrows her eyes, because that's foul play.

"Understood," comes Zabuza's low voice.

"I'm not tired, the day is only beginning," she protests, but the three advancing figures give her no room to argue, and the blond in the doorway seems to smirk at her.

"Just a quick nap," Tsunade assures her, and then she's gone, flitting off into the hallways without an escort, free of confusing conversations and mother henning companions. Free, after vindictively setting others onto her patient, because she's a medic, and medics can do that.

"Where's the others?" Ryushi asks, half hoping to use it as a distraction, half genuinely curious.

"They had to go train," Haku tells her. "Though they won't be in this Chuunin Exam, they are hoping to enter the next one."

Ryuishi blanks, hard. What does he mean they aren't going to be in this examination? Ryuishi busted her ass to make sure this examination would be the safest one in fucking history. Not that she isn't sort of relieved, because they honestly aren't ready, but dear Sage, what the fuck is he talking about?

Zabuza narrows his eyes at her, catching the expression on her face. He knows when she begins to think about things too hard and worry about them, and the doctor just said she was facing too much stress. Does she want to go back into the hospital?

"Sleep," he commands her, and she settles her eyes on him.

"What do you mean Team Seven isn't going to the chuunin exams?" she demands.

"Hatake-san said that it was discussed, but after the events in River, the team was unwilling to attempt promotion at this time. It's unsurprising, as they are all rookies," Haku explains in lieu of his master.

"Yes, but-" she starts, and then stops. But what? She thought things would stick to canon after she fucked everything up? She thought that anything would be remotely the same after the amount of force she had been using to make sure that exact thing didn't happen. Yes, but things didn't usually go her way?

She shuts her eyes, lifting her hand to pinch the bridge of her nose. Maybe Tsunade, despite all her cryptic bullshit, was right. She could probably use a nap. Just a quick one.

"Sleep," Zabuza intones again, and this time his large hand is on her arm, jerking her up into a standing position and herding her toward her rooms.

"Alright, alright," she submits, and when he drags her to her rooms, she sticks by her word. She doesn't collapse, per se, but she does drape herself over the elegant-looking chaise and fall asleep fairly fast.

Which leaves Misaki there, smiling to herself as she drapes a light blanket over her worn leader, and Zabuza and Haku watching over her.

AN: I didn't intend for Ryuishi to have a 'let me tell you my sad anime backstory' moment, but here it is. Mostly because the characters have to understand her on some level at least, and they have to have motivations for certain events to occur. Also, It needed to be revealed that Ryuishi is coming to a point of not only physical exhaustion, but emotional and mental as well. She's worn thinner than she ever has been, and she has her group and they know now, but Ryuishi has always been secretive and duplicitous. They say they want to help, but she doesn't know how to let that happen. Also, punches keep coming. Gaara next chapter.

A shout out to my lurker,s favoriters and followers. A big old party for my reviewers, who have boosted this story incredibly

high and deserve a cool day of fun with loved ones.

TO ENBI, MY OVERWORKED BETA: FRIEND, U R 2 COOL. NO, seriously, even when they were super busy they managed to get this chapter to me and I cannot be thankful enough. #bless

Questions: How do you foresee Ryuishi reacting to everyone's 'help'? OR Why the fresh hell did Tsunade discover in their little conversation?

In Which There are Repercussions

I do not own Naruto.

It's basically a scientific fact that if you nap too long, you wake up incredibly out of it.

Actually, that's probably a lie, but the fact remains that Ryuishi has never just taken a nap and not had it seriously fuck her up. Honestly speaking, every time she falls asleep when the sun is still up, she wakes up disoriented and a bit weird. It's hard to describe, because it's kinda chaotic in nature. She's both hyper-focused and scatterbrained all at once. Which, you know, isn't the best way to be meeting with Orochimaru, but hey, that's life. Doing things you are drastically not prepared to do. Or something.

Okay, sue her, she's really fucking out of it, but a glance in the mirror tells her she looks as fierce and ready as ever, all sharp eyes and swooshy robes. As long as she can bullshit her way through it, she's fine.

"Alright, and you're sure they bought it?" Ryuishi asks, probably for the fourteenth time. Or third. Who knows, she likes hyperbole.

"Of course, Ryuu-sama," Misaki assures her, fixing the beautiful ornamental tsunami kanzashi in her hair and running her finger along the glimmering bira-bira.

Ryuishi sighs in relief, her hand running upwards to touch the other woman's gently. Misaki's blue eyes lock onto hers in the mirror, and they both pause for a moment.

"Thank you, Misaki," Ryuishi says, trying to convey the sheer gratitude she feels in her voice. "For coming here when it is dangerous, and for always being so loyal."

Misaki flushes, her creamy skin stained pink, but she smiles so wide it must hurt. "I am honored you would thank me. I would do no less for the one who stood by us when no one else would. Just look at me now, a handmaiden to a lady. Why, just a few months ago I was having intercourse for money-can you believe it?"

Ryuishi snorts, decidedly showing exactly how ladylike she is, and the two of them break into snickers. It's a moment of lighthearted mirth when there has been darkness and stress for so long, and it's a balm to Ryuishi. She's gone through so much, lived so long, and she never really believed she would ever be dressed in fine robes to meet with a Kage for pure reasons.

Who would have thought a couple of brothel girls could end up where they are now?

"Well," Ryuishi says, smiling. "Since Zabuza and Haku will be busy for the next several hours waiting on a medication that I don't need to take, let's go see what my business partner has summoned me for."

"After you, my lady," Misaki says with a perfectly executed bow.

Ryuishi rolls her eyes, not knowing whether it's real or fake. Her mind wanders, and she decides she doesn't really care. She sucks in a breath, straightens her back, and sweeps out of the door imperiously, Misaki trailing a few steps behind, as is proper.

Only, Ryuishi dashes back a few second later, popping her head in the door so her voice won't echo in the hallways.

"Dick, shit, piss, cockmonger, motherfucker, ass licking, son of a cum covered testicle. Fuck, fuck, fuck, and one more fuck for some good fucking luck," she spits inside the room, just to be sure she gets it all out before facing Orochimaru. She ducks back around the corner, disappearing as quickly as she entered, strands of her long black hair trailing behind her.

(In the rafters, Tenzō suddenly finds himself relieved. He may have his doubts about Orochimaru, old fears he doesn't want to face, but he is sure, at least, that the Watanabe he had come to know over the years is exactly as ridiculous as always.)

Ryuishi glides along gracefully, and she knows she looks imperious and regal, but she really wishes the silk slippers that went with this outfit didn't have such shitty grip on the highly-glossed floors of this ritzy ass place. It's not that she doesn't like sliding around, in fact it's quite the opposite. She wants to slide around everywhere, and the temptation is constantly lingering in the back of her head. She has to be cool and collected, but she wants to act like an actual five-year-old child discovering the combination of socks and hardwood floors for the first time.

Her hands twitch inside her billowing sleeves as she resists the impulse, and she continues onward, eating up the ground between her and Orochimaru's quarters. All around her, finery shouts and clamors for her attention, from the tasteful hardwood floors to the elegant lanterns hanging from the ceiling. It's fancy as shit, and it makes her vaguely uncomfortable. She's never really been into ostentatious displays of wealth and station, and these quarters kind of scream it. Still, Orochimaru chose them, and he did save her ass, so if he wants to be a prima donna, what does it cost her?

(Idly, she runs figures in the back of her head. Probably a lot, actually. At least 6-7 digits.)

She turns another corner, and a door awaits her. She wastes no time announcing her presence, and before she can even get a foot away, it is opened from the inside. She steps through without pause, and it closes behind her, Misaki waiting in the hall. In front of her, Orochimaru sits with his hat and veil off, idly glancing out the window. A cup of tea steams in front of him, and it smells earthy and rich.

"You're early," he comments lightly, turning to face her, and his eyes alight upon her robes. "And properly garbed, which is unusual," he

notes. "Don't you feel so much better, dressed in clothes that fit your station?"

She sends him a smile, wicked and sharp. "I feel like there is an abundant amount of purple and white in our attire. Did you get us matching outfits?"

"For every day we will be here," he replies with mock-solemnity, and she quirks her lips downwards. That was supposed to be a joke. Unfortunately, she knows he isn't joking.

"Why?" she asks.

"How else will people associate us on a subconscious level?" he drawls, taking a drink from his cup.

She sends a baleful glance at him, which he ignores completely. He has a point, but she's also unsure she wants to be forever tied with the Otokage in the dark depths of people's brains.

"Now," he rasps. "Sit. You and I have much to discuss."

She hesitates for the briefest of moments, but experience and common sense tell her that there is no getting away from this, so she petulantly slinks over to seat herself adjacent from him. For a moment, he simply observes her. She can feel his eyes roam over her frame, searching her posture for any sign of weakness or ignorance.

"I admit, I did not expect you to survive any encounter you had with the Akatsuki," he begins tonelessly. "Your social needs proved their worth, for if you were on your own, you would have died."

She bites her lip and shakes her head. "No, if they wanted me dead, I would be," she states, and she's pretty sure it's the truth. Kakuzu had her wrapped tight in his grasp, bleeding and wounded. He could have killed her right then and there.

Orochimaru emits some low sound, like a blade cracking through wood, and his nails tap on the surface of his cup as he contemplates the new information.

"You are aware of what this means, I assume," he comments lightly.

Unfortunately, Ryuishi isn't really aware of what it means, other than the fact that a high class organization full of badasses is gunning for her. She's actually bewildered as fuck, and now that she thinks about it, sorta pissed. They couldn't send the only two fuckers she wants to see in that damn place, no, it was just Hidan and Kakuzu. She doesn't give a flying fuck about Hidan or the tentacle monster.

"It was the man I told you about, from Steam, and his partner-

"-your father," Orochimaru interjects.

This, Ryuishi cannot ignore, and she sends raises her head to sneer at him. Of *course* he knew. Of course he confirmed it, and then never thought to inform her. She wondered, not that she actually cares. Still, it means he's been digging into her bloodline, and she's not okay with that. And she's super not okay with him using that term to describe the man.

"I assume you mean that he loaned some genetic material for my conception, because he certainly isn't any parent to me. I have no father," she snaps.

"I don't care a whit about your sentimental relations," Orochimaru hisses. "The fact that they sent those two means they were to collect *you* -a prominent figure among the people, with enough resources to hold Hidden Villages at bay, and enough political power to keep your own past buried."

Ryuishi thinks that it's a bit drastic of a subject change, and she can't follow it exactly. Obviously, he knows this, because he scowls, placing his palm flat on the table.

"Ignorant child, do you really not understand? With my acceptance among the noble courts, and your economic hold, we are untouchable so long as we remain within a set of very loose rules. The Daimyo may loathe you for your tactics and station of birth, but you have brought their worst fears to life. You hold enormous sway over the fineries they covet, and the people they rule over. You showed exactly what you would do to them if they stood against you like the Grass Daimyo, who still hides away, clinging to the remnants of his dignity and power. With my militaristic forces and your resources, we have drawn whole nations into a standstill. Even the Kage themselves are tied when it comes to acting against us, especially when you hold the hearts of not one, but *two* jinchuuriki."

She raises a brow, because he thinks he might be overselling it just a bit. She's basically a figurehead, and the system works so that the people can manage themselves. She just funnels money to the right places and steps in when people are being douchebags or stepping over lines.

Also, Naruto and Gaara hold just as much sway over her own heart. It's not a one-way street, or a one-sided affection. She cares for them, deeply and truly.

"You are a lynchpin," he explains, ignorant to her musing. "You are worth an incredible amount, and destroying you would spark a war unlike anything we have ever seen. It would transcend ninja and extend into the classes themselves. Nothing would remain untouched, and the bloodshed would be incredible. That is why the nations acknowledge us. Now, if that is what your death would cause, imagine what owning you would entail."

For a second the point slips by, but then Ryuishi's eyes widen to an incredible degree, staring at the man who has saved her ass.

Holy shit, she thinks. Holy shit. I done made myself Franz Ferdinand, or Central Asia. I'm Pakistan, bordering three superpowers with ties to them all and a wealth of resources. I'm the fertile crescent or-shit. Shitshitshit.

She opens her mouth to object, or to ask who let her do this, but no sound comes out but a short, choked exhalation of air.

On one hand, she is delighted that she has made it so far and that they have trapped their enemies so soundly. Plainly speaking, it's all politics now between established nations, because Rice and its leaders have become integral to the continent, and now exist within the same uneasy truce as everybody else. Hooray for establishing a nation.

On the other hand, WHO LET THIS HAPPEN? There is no way she should have made it this far. She should be dead by now, or laughed at for being a joke. How did a piece of garbage like her end up anywhere at all? Good sweet Shango, the responsibility is enormous, and she's the most irresponsible person she knows. She's not supposed to be important, she's Ryuishi.

(Ame has no Daimyo to listen to; Hanzō slaughtered them in his coup. It's been self-sufficient for years and has held its border closed against not only her but all of the Elemental Nations for years. They aren't caught in her net, a rogue variable she didn't deal with fast enough.)

All at once, it seems to punch her in the face, and she struggles with it.

"I see you have acknowledged the scope of things," Orochimaru says dryly.

Reality begins to seem like a bit of a hazy concept to her at that point, and she sort of zones out. Her mind goes blank, filled with white noise and static, and she's present, but she's not really *there*. She's vaguely aware that it doesn't seem so paranoid of her to have a post-mortem plan in place now.

"What now?" she hears herself asking.

"That depends on what you desire," he states calmly.

Ryuishi wants to rest, quite frankly. She wants to stop being so anxious and have things work out. She wants her jobs to be over. She wants what she always has, to be happy.

And now she's basically a metaphorical grenade, waiting to go off.

She lets out a strained sigh, her sleeve-covered hands coming to cradle her face for a moment. She just needs... she just needs everything to stop, rewind. She just confessed her life story this morning, and children were crying. Zabuza and Kakashi are being weird, she's in fancy robes, and she's important now? Nothing makes sense.

She doesn't know what to do. Put her in a fight. Put her in the middle of a battle, where blood is pouring and people are screaming. Put her in an argument, where words are thrown and venom is spat. Put her somewhere deep and dark, filled with struggle and strife. She knows that, she can do that. She's tired of it, so very tired, but at least it is familiar.

This? This 'you matter and are acknowledged' thing? She's not really sure she gets it.

The most normal thing happening here is that the Akatsuki is aiming for her, and it's sorta fucked that a dangerous crime syndicate out for her head is on par with normal in her life. Don't get her wrong, it's surprising, but she's used to being hunted. She's familiar with running and fighting. She's *not* used to being ordered to stand by Orochimaru's side while he sticks it to the man who was his sensei.

"Are you quite finished with your dramatics?" said man demands.

"Nope," Ryuishi saysquips.

She's stuck in between thoughts, some fuzzy place where nothing is certain. She doesn't know how to react because it's pretty far out of her parameters. It's like the pieces inside her head won't fit, and there is only a dissonance.

What if that's it, though? What if it's not about reacting anymore, but about just acting? What comes after? What do you do when you're tired, other than sleep? What happens next?

I have no idea what I'm doing these days, she thinks to herself, a touch defeated and a touch hysterical. I'm winging it so hard I am the very definition of improvisation.

She takes a deep breath to steel herself, locking away the half-formed ideas and spider-webbing thoughts inside her head. They continue to fester and grow, but she ignores them as best as she can.

"Okay," she breathes, lifting her head. "Now I'm done."

He spares her a glance that tells her she better damn well be done, his golden eyes impatient and reprimanding. She faces it without remorse, because she needed that moment. They both know she did, and she refuses to regret it. Or she will regret it later where he cannot see.

Fake it 'till you make it, she thinks.

(In the back of her head, the phrase 'deadman's switch' and 'kill trigger' are a comfort to her.)

Ryuishi looks at the assembled team in front of them, her eyes judgemental and cool. She slides them over to glance at Orochimaru, who has donned his hat and veil, and she hopes he can feel her skepticism through sheer force of will.

The Sound Four aren't what she would call genin.

Granted, they aren't really the Sound Four, or even the Sound Five for that matter. She hasn't really kept track of the clans, but she knows that a one Kaguya Kimimaro is a tokubetsu jounin of Otogakure proper. He was instated in the system since it began,

along with many of the founding clan members, and though he's not exactly the picture of health, he's not on his deathbed either. Because the Kaguya Clan is alive, there is a medical history available that wasn't there in canon, not to mention the increased productivity rate that implementing an actual scientific process produced. She has no idea what illness plagues that bloodline, but apparently it isn't uncommon, and there have been ways to slow it down. Combined with Orochimaru's overpowered genius, they are making steps in the direction of reversing it completely.

Sakon and Ukon, well, they're chunin last she heard, probably fucking some shit up somewhere. She knows she's seen them around, sleeping on the job like the brats they are.

She's not sure if anything is the same as in canon in this regard. For instance, there was no giant death matches in underground bunkers for Orochimaru's amusement that she knew of. There was no weird smoke and shadow kidnapping shit either, these kids came in like many other of the clans in the Land of Rice.

Oh, and there were a shit ton of wandering clans in Rice. Nothing big and established, but nomads from the wars, washed up in the paddies, and bastards left with farming mothers. They cropped up fairly regularly, and Orochimaru had gathered more than his fair share of them. She didn't really tend to think of them unless interacting directly with them, because in Sound they didn't have segregated compounds or establishments. They lived in the residential district with everybody else.

They have curse marks, but Ryuishi is torn on that point as well. The curse mark survival rate was one of the first things Orochimaru began to work on when he had the chance, and it's not uncommon to see it around. It probably still hurts, and it works with powerful emotion, but he gives it to those that consent. Hell, he's choosy as fuck about who he puts his horcruxes into, and why wouldn't he be? That's a shred of his consciousness he's handing over. And yeah, it's fucked up, it's definitely fucked up, but so is a lot of shit, and it's not

like she let this happen. She actively tried to stop so much it wasn't even funny.

Unfortunately, changes happen slowly. Or rather, changes such as abolishing the use of child soldiers takes a very long time, especially since it has been policy since before memoriam. She can fight against it her whole life and she still might not get anywhere.

She slides her eyes back to the three, who stand attentively, waiting to be given orders. At the very least she can say they have wages, they consented, and they have an outlet. It's mandatory for Oto-nin to choose something non-shinobi to participate in, something that both Ryuishi and Orochimaru agreed on. Fanatics, while strong and dedicated, were useless without leaders and unadaptable, not to mention unstable.

They also probably attended some education facility at some point. She doesn't know what kind of subjects they excelled in, or if they continued their studies, but it was there for them if they wanted it.

It's not perfect, or good, but it's better than it was by a long shot.

Still...

"Genin," she states, her tone dripping with accusation.

She can practically feel him grin underneath his veil. Technically, they have never had a promotion, or even participated in an exam.

"Where are your manners?" Orochimaru rasps at the group. They stand straighter in an effort to please him, and Ryuishi feels bad. What are they, ten? Probably not ten, but like, twelve? Thirteen? Fourteen?

"My name is Kidōmaru, Ryuu-hime," begins the one with dark skin and darker hair. His tone is respectful and his eyes are clever, but what Ryuishi is really jealous of is his three sets of arms. Imagine

what she could do if she had six hands. Triple the amount of things to throw poorly, yeah, but triple the hits she could give.

"Tayuya," the redheaded girl grunts, her black eyes glued onto Ryuishi. Her tone is a little more gruff, but Ryuishi doesn't really care. It's fine to be gruff at times, and she feels weird about being called Ryuu-hime anyway.

"I am known as Jirōbō, Ryuu-sama," says the politest of the three, and the largest. Instinctively, Ryuishi hates his haircut for some reason, and also the fact that this kid is already a few centimeters taller than her. She's a grown ass woman, and she's not small in any sense of the word. Her and Hatake are around the same height, but this kid...

Her thoughts wander for a moment before she is brought back to the point. Sound Three, way too overpowered for a typical Chuunin Exam.

She lifts her wrist in front of her face, her long sleeves masking her in the proper fashion and hiding her lips from view. She side eyes Orochimaru once more, and this time their gazes connect.

Is this necessary? she mouths quietly.

The slight narrowing of his golden eyes tells her what she needs to know. He wants Otokakure to make more than just a showing, he wants Otokakure to make an impression. He chose incredibly strong technically-still-genin, and it's clever, both business-wise and security-wise. If this is their genin stock, the nations will ask themselves what it is they consider jounin-level, and it will attract customers. It also challenges anyone who thinks of attacking them to think twice. Their presence here is a power show in more than one way.

"Children," Orochimaru hums, and everyone in the room straightens at once, including Misaki, because his tone is vague and he could be speaking about anyone at that moment. True, he only called Ryuishi

'child' when he was being particularly pretentious, but it had happened on more than one occasion. "Meiji formation. Let us all go for a walk."

For a second, Ryuishi impulsively moves to take left wing in the formation, but his stare makes her freeze in place, and the genin settle around the trio of adults. She realizes belatedly that, no, he wasn't talking to her, but the actual ninja under his command. Which she is not.

Acting as if she never made the mistake in the first place, she raises her head and steps beside Orochimaru. Together their robes rustle on the ground, and they instinctively mirror each other's movements. Hands clasped in front, steps in sync, chins tilted upward, and narrow eyes scanning.

Misaki, the lone civilian in the group, marvels at how in sync the two leaders are, but the genin accept it as an example of what to become. A partnership so harmonious that even their breathing is the same.

They step outward, and suddenly they are on the path to the front door and the city at large. She wants to hesitate, to point out that it's sort of a dick move to so openly move amongst the city when they are playing this game of politics. It's not really necessary to display that they can and will do as they please.

Then again, Ryuishi is somewhat spiteful, and she takes a sense of satisfaction the moment they step outside the doors. She isn't hiding anymore, and she doesn't have to worry about being recognized by anybody save perhaps Haku and Zabuza, who will ride her tits for going around Orochimaru without them. She isn't here to serve anybody, or play informant. She's here to do as she pleases.

The fresh air slaps her in the face, and she smells Konoha, all hard packed-earth and human, cooking foods and cement. The breeze caresses her, and she feels about a million feet tall in that moment.

"I once called this city home," Orochimaru says, and to anyone else he would sound nonchalant, but to Ryuishi he sounds pensive. "Now, it pales in comparison to the one I have built."

"They don't even have a trader's square," Kidōmaru states dismissively. "They have a market district and that's it."

"Whatever are you doing near trader's square?" Misaki wonders.

Kidōmaru doesn't answer, but Jirōbō does. "If you help them unpack their crates from the wagons, they give you some of the food," he replies, and Ryuishi smirks. First pick from the harvest is as good a reason to assist the merchants as any.

"Naturally, as shinobi, you can unload a wagon fairly quickly," she comments lightly. She sees the tips of Kidōmaru's ears burn at the statement.

"Faster than Jirōbō," he mutters underneath his breath.

"The residential districts are separate," Tayuya cuts in blandly, as if noting the color of the sky. "There are ninja quarters and civilian quarters."

"More habit than anything else, I assure you," Orochimaru informs the group. "There are places where the two meet, but it remains more segregated than Otogakure. Konohagakure is quite integrated for a hidden village as well."

Tayuya makes a dismissive sound, which would make sense. Konoha is a bit separated for children of Otogakure, who lived so much of their lives integrated with the regular populace.

They walk onwards, and people begin to notice the group. Two finely-robed individuals and a third demurely dressed adult standing amongst a group of foreign shinobi. It's fairly conspicuous, especially considering the fact that Orochimaru is wearing his Otokage robes.

The city life bustles around them as they make a tour of the city, announcing their presence to the world. Heads crane and people gawk, but the Sound contingency is professional through and through, playing the part of wandering visitors to perfection.

Ryuishi, invigorated by the fresh air and the sensation of sunlight on her skin, feels pretty content. She's walking by herself, there's no tubes in her, and she looks fancy as fuck.

"Truly, the diversification of our produce has left me jaded," she drawls, observing a passing stall. There is only one type of basil, and it actually throws her for a moment.

"Perhaps they accumulate more profit from that one," Orochimaru states calmly. "Wasting it by diversifying seems to be a poor choice."

"On one level, maybe," Ryuishi states. "Take in the fact that planting only one type of crop deprives the soil of the nutrients essential to that crop, and also places one at the mercy of disease and pests that prey on it. In the long run it also affects biodiversity and health, because one type of crop only provides a set amount of nutrients. It's best to vary between a moderate amount of species."

"As always, taking in a larger scale shifts the idea, but please do remember that not everyone cares about long term viability," Orochimaru fires back.

Ryuishi rolls her eyes, because *of course* people do short-term planning. She's doing it right now.

Unbeknownst to the group, a trio of onlookers stand transfixed at the sight of them. Gaara's eyes stare onwards in rapt attention, and his sister watches him worriedly.

"Gaara," Temari whispers, and he can feel her hand on his shoulder. "Gaara, we don't know what the story is."

"It's her," he murmurs, and his mouth feels dry. It feels like her, and that is her face. Something in his chest sinks, because he's so confused. Why is she dressed so finely, speaking to the Otokage? Why does she walk escorted by ninja, followed by a handmaiden?

"It... it really does look like her, Temari," Kankuro agrees hesitantly. "I mean, she's walking differently and cleaned up, but that's definitely Risa."

How could she do this? How could she keep this from him? He thought... he thought that she cared, that she loved him, but here she is, talking with the Otokage in Konoha. She lied, and *what else has she been lying about?*

"Gaara," Temari calls louder, and this time, *she* hears it. Her eyes go wide and they turn towards him, picking him out of the crowds faster than the rain disappearing in the desert sun.

Those black eyes bear down on him, and they might be made narrow and sharp by makeup, but they are hers. They are the eyes of the woman that found him years ago, that held him when everyone else was afraid to touch him, and the same woman who called him hers.

The same one who is a **liar** .

The Otokage, who is standing beside her, turns to see what she is looking at. In that moment, under that golden gaze, Gaara feels weighed and judged, measured and dissected.

Gaara cannot read his lips because of the veil, but he sees Aneue wince, then pull a face. She begins to move, and her Rice Country robes billow in the wake of her steps.

That whisper in his head that has always been with him cackles, and he feels anger and fear mingle. He doesn't want her to come nearer, to come any closer. She lied, she lied like Uncle lied and s **he could hurt him** .

"Why?" Gaara asks Aneue tonelessly, and he takes a step back, his siblings surrounding him like a protective wall. The sand on his skin buzzes in agitation, little grains taking flight, glinting in the bright sunlight.

She is mouthing something to him, something he can't hear. His heart beats rapidly in his chest, and the blood rushes to his ears. He doesn't know her at all, does he? This woman is a stranger. The Aneue he knew caught lizards and said bad words. She sang songs and played catch and pushed him on the swings. She had manners like a thug, and she ate food like she had never seen it before in her life.

The woman in front of him looks like a noble, all flowing robes and elegant finery. Her hair is silken and straight, her lips colored and eyes lined. She wears silk around the scar on her throat, hiding herself from the world. She's standing beside the Otokage, and she's important. More important than him.

"Gaara-" he hears, closer now. She's broken away from the group she was with, charging ahead of them, and he's frozen in between choices. His brain shuts off, and that monster inside of his head laughs and laughs and laughs. It seems to be giddy at his situation, absolutely mad with glee at how entertained it is.

She pushes past his brother, and for a moment he is astounded by how strong she is because Kankuro is a ninja and-

-and then he smells saltwater and blossoms, and his head goes quiet, the same as it always has.

"Gaara," he hears again, louder, right beside his ear, and he feels her cool hands on his back, which have snaked underneath his gourd. She hunches over to embrace him, and her hair is in his face.

"Aneue?" he asks, because is it her? Or is it a stranger who has been using him?

"Always. Always Aneue, always yours, always my otouto," Ryuishi states, right there in front of god and everybody, because no. No more losing. No more accepting defeat. She's here and she gets to do what she wants, which is hugging the little fucker in front of her. Orochimaru can suck a dick, Konoha can eat an ass, and the world can fight her, but she's not letting this one slip away, not unless he demands it.

"Hey!" Kankuro cries, brushing himself off, "What kind of freakish strength do you have lady?"

"I wouldn't call the Lady of Otogakure freakish if I were you," one of the ninja in her entourage spits, and Gaara feels numb.

"Kidōmaru," snaps the kunoichi of the group, and the boy goes quiet.

"I thought you were a candy seller," Gaara says in a small voice. He stares at her, and the world around them seems to disappear. It's just him and her, nobody else.

"Sometimes I am," she murmurs to him. "And sometimes I'm a politician, and other times a missing-nin."

He has no response for that other than a blank expression.

"But no matter what, I'm always, *always* a sister," she says.

"And a liar," he interjects cuttingly, and he feels her flinch, but she grips him tighter, and he doesn't want to feel as safe he does in her arms.

"And a liar," she agrees, quiet and defeated.

He is angry and confused and hurt and nothing makes sense. He wants to push her away and pull her tighter to him, but he isn't sure of anything, anything at all.

His sand rattles, agitated and upset, and it stirs in the air around them like a sentient thing, in tune with his emotions.

Are you surprised, says the voice inside his head, **that the shade that wears human skin has deceived you? That she is an abomination, as I said?**

He wants to be, and he is, somewhat, but also... also, he isn't. He isn't because he knew, somewhere deep inside that Aneue wasn't what she said she was. It wasn't the way the voice talked about her, or the way others whispered. No, it was the way she didn't cry out when he hurt her with his sand, or accidentally cut herself. It was the way when she came to him when his uncle hurt him, and she wrapped his hands around her neck. It's the way she gave him a chance to kill her, to end her life, and she faced it like she accepted his choice.

"Gaara," his sister calls, his blood sister.

He pulls back, and for a second it feels as if she won't let him go, as if she will keep him trapped here forever, but her hands slowly loosen their grip, and he slides willingly out of her grip. She's still hunched over, looking him in the eye, and for a moment, they remain there, staring at each other. He looks at the woman who raised him, torn and conflicted, and she stares back, determined and hopeful.

"I-" Gaara begins, but he's interrupted by a shout.

"IT'S BEEN FOUR HOURS, DATTEBAYO. WE LEFT YOU ALONE FOR FOUR HOURS," a distressingly loud voice hollers, and the woman in front of him closes her eyes with the air of someone who is just *done* .

"Stay out of this!" Kankuro shouts, and it's a kind display in his defense, but Gaara feels that it is pointless.

"You stay out of this!" snaps a new voice (female this time), sharp and cutting.

"It seems your escort team has discovered us," the man in the ceremonial robes of a Kage drawls, and Gaara has no idea what the

Otokage is doing, or why he is so amused, but he feels like the man shouldn't be.

"Escort team?" Temari wonders out loud.

The sound of stomping feet heralds their arrival, and soon enough, a dirty, sweating team that appears to have just come back from training is muscling their way into the group, headed by an orange-wearing wrecking ball. The boy throws out elbows and kicks tirelessly, shoving his way to Aneue's side.

"You got out of the hospital like two days ago!" he chastises, and Gaara feels a bolt of shock run through him, eclipsing the confusion in his head.

"You were in the hospital?" he asks as she stands back up.

"She just woke up from a coma less than a week ago," a raven haired boy tells him, and Gaara has no idea who he is, but he's thankful for this information.

"Don't tell people that," Aneue bites out, a scowl marring her pristine countenance.

"Ryuu-sama, you need to take it easy. If you were going for a walk, you should have told us," a pink-haired girl scolds.

"She doesn't need to tell anybody anything," the boy with-and Gaara isn't sure how he missed this- *six arms* snaps at her.

"I'm sorry, but who are you?" the pink-haired girl asks with sickening sweetness.

"I should be asking that," the boy snaps at her.

"I just said I would get stronger so you wouldn't do things alone. Here you are, doing things alone," the blond boy lectures Aneue.

"You know what?" Aneue's eyes are turned heavenwards as if asking the gods for supplication. "I deserve this. I did this to myself."

"You did," agrees the Otokage.

Gaara sits in silence, watching the ongoing events in confusion. He feels the familiar figure of Temari standing at his shoulder, bunching in tight against him to guard his back. Kankuro does the same, brushing dust off his clothes from where he was shoved to the ground.

"What the hell is happening?" Kankuro asks with a bewildered look on his face.

"Apparently, and stick with me here, because it's a bit hard to follow, the woman who has been selling candy in our village for years now is actually nobility, specifically the Lady of Otogakure. The man with the veil is the Otokage, and the blond brat, the pink-haired one, and the black haired kid are her appointed escort team, who she snuck out without notifying. She also was in a coma, having woke up fairly recently, and seems to be having health issues. I can only conclude that the harmless woman known as Risa was a cover, and she's been infiltrating Sunagakure for some reason," Temari hypothesizes.

"Is there perhaps a young child involved in this?" asks a strange man with silver hair. He appears so quickly and stealthily that even Gaara is startled by his arrival, which is quite the feat. Gaara can only assume that he is a high-ranking shinobi of some repute to be so skilled.

"My brother," Temari answers without batting an eyelash, gesturing to Gaara. She has weighed her options, and found this to be the one that offers the most reward with least risk.

The man nods, examining him before idly sliding his eye back to where two genin seem to be lecturing Aneue, one of which who flits back and forth between arguing with one of the Sound ninja. The

third member of their team seems to have gotten in a glaring contest with the Sound kunoichi.

"Well, I can only assume, based on past experience, that she may have contacted him with the initial intention of subverting his loyalty. However, she failed to take into account her own easily malleable will and grew attached to the point of caring for the child herself," the man states. His grey eye darts to Gaara, and the boy stares back at it silently. "Tell me, did she teach you life lessons? Grant you affection? Perhaps give you a doting family comprised of prostitutes?"

"All but the last," Gaara answers him truthfully. The stranger seems to be the only one with answers here, and Gaara has many questions he would like answered. In fact, he seems to have answered several of them in one fell swoop, which is convenient, and the only reason Gaara allows his poor manners.

The man nods, closing his eyes thoughtfully. "I recently assumed that she was a master manipulator, controlling others around her and attempting to rule them by their emotions. I guessed she was attempting to use the connections and bonds she had made for her own gain, but was shown otherwise when she attempted to sacrifice herself in order for those I thought she was manipulating," the elite ninja states succinctly.

"Wait, what are you saying?" Kankuro interjects, looking perplexed.

Temari, however, seems to have caught every detail, her fist tucked under her chin. She nods to herself, letting out a hum. "So she almost died protecting the people she cared about instead of using them. She thought she was a master manipulator but she failed to take her own attachments into consideration," she says with dawning understanding. It's a rookie mistake, and the reason that saboteur ninja need to undergo very specific training to avoid that exact situation.

Gaara takes a moment to run through it all in his head one more time, making sure it makes any sort of sense in his head. He squints at the stranger, then his sister figure.

Aneue...

Aneue has no idea what she's doing, does she?

AN: So, there is very much plot clues for the future in this chapter, and also, Gaara. Gaara who is actually the most emotionally well balanced of them all, Surprise everybody, the sand jinchuuriki has the support of his siblings and also realizes that Ryuishi was wrong when she lied to him. This is also what I'm going to dub the 'Everything is chaos and all actions are arguably justifiable from certain perspectives' lesson start. We are going to deal with a lot of subjective morality and philosophy in upcoming chapters, as well as dealing with shifting mentalities and conflicting desires. I foresee flames ahead, even though I specifically warned you canon would never be the same. Also, I would like to say the we are understaffed at work and I am pulling longer hours as a result. I don't want to, but that's life. Good news is, Jiraiya next chapter and Kisame chapter after that. Bad news is, the stress of it may have come out in the chapters a bit.

**Shout out to my lurkers, my favoriters, and my followers.
HELLO REVIEWERS, HAVE I TOLD YOU LATELY THAT I
CHERISH YOU?**

To my beta enbi; You remain the best. Thank you for your hard work and dedication, and also your snapchats.

QUESTION: HOW THE HELL IS JIRAIYA GONNA ACT? Or What do you think the deadman's switches are?

In Which People Intervene

I do not own Naruto.

Ultimately, Ryuishi supposes that she should have probably had a better grasp of the ramifications of her actions over the years. Ideally, she'd have less personal attachment to the people that she'd been thinking of as pieces, and a better grasp of how they would react to her own presence on the board.

Admittedly, she'd probably been looking at the wrong scale of things. She isn't sure how, considering she thought about her actions on several scales over time. She'd taken things on a local scale, as it affected small groups of people within a unit-sized group. Then came a community scale, which averaged about the quarter size of an established settlement, then on settlement scale, then on interconnected town scale, then districts, sectors, countries, and continental scale. Hell, she briefly toyed with global ideas before dismissing them for having too many variables.

For all her carefully laid plans and choreographed moves, all the possibilities she considered, the universe still manages to throw something at her that she has no idea how to handle.

At this point, she's riding the wake of chaos that seems to define her visit to Konoha so far. She's really unsure how to feel about it at this moment, other than flabbergasted and bewildered.

Reading the people around her, she guesses that she's the only one though, because everyone appears to have settled on a state of mind. Hell, even Orochimaru is mirthful, though it would be hard for anybody who didn't know him (insomuch as anybody can *really* know him) to read the absolute glee behind his slitted golden eyes. He's always had one hell of a poker face.

To be honest, she's not even sure when Zabuza and Haku got here either, which says a lot about how fucked her situational awareness is. Haku appears to be holding a white paper bag full of (fake) medicine for her, and Zabuza is doing his very best to communicate how very fucked she is with his eyes alone. He's doing a pretty good job.

Naruto seems to be under the assumption that she is not allowed anywhere by herself in the foreseeable future, a sentiment mirrored by his sensei. Sakura is still casually checking her over with her brilliant green eyes, and Sasuke looks like he's about to attempt to retrieve her from the grasp of the Sound genin himself.

Temari is staring at her like she can strip the secrets from her person with willpower alone, which is actually pretty funny. At this point Ryuishi isn't even really sure how many she has accumulated.

Kankuro appears to be mistrustful and also shocked, caught between gaping at everybody like a fish out of water, and Gaara is stoic and also about a second away from bolting.

Which, you know-understandable.

She should probably feel a little bit guilty, and she is, a tiny bit, but more than that, she feels defensive and mildly apathetic. They may think she's the conductor on this crazy train, but they are *wrong*. She's more of the coal powering it than the one steering. She has about as much clue as anybody else.

She goes to open her mouth, maybe even attempt an explanation-

"No," Zabuza, Kakashi, and Haku immediately say in unison.

She closes her mouth without remorse. Yah, she wouldn't give herself a chance to lie either with all this really damning evidence around her. Not that she has any clue how she would even start, but she's pretty fucking sure she could come up with something. She's good at that.

It's really too bad at least three of them know she could probably twist her way out of this if given enough leeway. Four, if she includes Orochimaru.

"Who are these people?" Naruto demands, like the little brat he is.

Inside her head, she attempts to sort out the categories herself. Naruto, Gaara, and Haku all slot inside her 'child/sibling/young-one-who-is-carried-within-my-heart'. Zabuza and Kakashi are harder, and if she was allowed to speak, she would just make an ambiguous noise. Mostly because 'friend' seems to be underselling it, 'family' gives the wrong impression, and 'emotional and mental pillar' is definitely off the table, though technically correct.

Orochimaru settles comfortably in the confines of 'co-founder'. She also considers 'partner-in-crime' and 'sadistic therapist' but the one she chooses has less negative connotations. 'Genin chosen to represent Otogakure in exams' is the category she slots Tayuya, Kidomaru, and Jirobo into, if only because she has a sort of general, but not at all personal knowledge of them, and met them less than four hours ago.

Finishing up, she has 'other young ones whom she regards fondly', which consists of Temari, Kankuro, Sasuke, and Sakura. Her heart says 'potential adoptions' as well, but her mind says, *Look at this mess, you want to make it bigger?*

Again, her instincts try and take over, and she inhales to get ready to maybe attempt to clear everything up a bit, but once more she is thwarted.

"Do not," Zabuza says in a forbidding tone, and it's pretty solid advice. In return, she would advise him to not shove a twelve (fourteen?) year old genin out of the way to get to her. However, it seems like he has enough common sense to know that by now. If only barely.

"I don't know if I'm upset or impressed at this point," Kakashi says drolly.

"We are angry," Naruto declares, arms crossed defiantly. "We are angry because she knows better."

Here Orochimaru's golden eyes slide over to stare at her. If he were a laughing type of person instead of a menacing jerk he might actually giggle at that one. However, it seems he is more offended on his own behalf. She represents Otogakure, and she is not to be treated as a child. It reflects poorly on Orochimaru.

Thanks for making me sound like a toddler, Sunshine, she thinks to herself.

"Perhaps," Orochimaru's sibilant voice hisses, causing the hairs to rise on a assortment of necks, "It should be recalled to whom you are speaking."

Ryuishi side-eyes him back, because pulling the 'important politician' card is a bit uncalled for... but she can see his reasoning. Maybe? Okay, no she can't.

"The Lady has only just recovered and is advised to stay away from stress, lest she relapse. I believe it may be best for her to... retire," the Otokage rasps.

Haku's hands tighten on the bag, and Zabuza takes a step forward. Obviously, she seriously underestimated how much they dislike Orochimaru.

"I believe I would know best about my health," she fires back calmly, outwardly composed. Inwardly, she's glad she's not wearing pants, because they would certainly be aflame. She fully acknowledges she knows fuck-all about health.

He gives her a look that says not to fight him on this, and she sends him a challenging glance back. She's not just going to run away

because he thinks it's time to withdraw.

However, one stoic, toneless voice makes her reconsider everything and simultaneously hits her like a roundhouse kick to the feels.

"I think it would be best if she left," Gaara says, and oh, oh holy shit, that fucking smarts.

Her head snaps around and her gaze locks with his, and for the first time in her life, she cannot read him. Him, the boy she held and played ball with, him who she snuggled tightly with and sang to, cradled in her arms.

However much it feels like a kick to the crotch, she knows that pushing it isn't going to do much. She has to... she has to give him space. He has to make a choice, and fluttering around won't help. He's confused and hurt and she's a fucking liar. This is what she gets for it.

Be mature, she thinks. Allow him to make his own choices, even though you want to smother him. If nothing else, know that he has his blood siblings.

She swallows her emotions down, and she's surprised at how simple it has come to be, closing up her feelings and thoughts and swallowing until they lodge in her throat like they will choke her. The familiar, practiced feeling of smoothing out her features into a calm blankness is as normal as putting on a bra in the morning.

"I understand," she says calmly.

Haku looks back and forth between her and Gaara desperately. "No!" he snaps. "Stop that right now!"

She flicks her eyes over to him, and he clutches the bag in his hands so hard the paper wrinkles. It takes only one simple glance to read the concern and worry in his eyes, and that tired piece of her wearily exclaims that this, too, is her fault.

"It's alright," she tells him gently. "I respect his decision and need for space and time."

His look tells her clearly what he thinks of her stance on the situation, but the fact remains that Ryuishi cannot stop and explain now. She doesn't know if she ever could. She's juggling too many pies as it is, and she can take this hit. She can accept these consequences as long as he stays happy and healthy, even if she is not in that future. In fact, it may be the only way for him to achieve such a state.

"My comrade is right, I feel weary," she lies. "I apologize for stirring up so much commotion today, and will retire to my rooms until tonight."

"A wise choice," Orochimaru hums, and he clasps his hand around her elbow. "The escort team may rest safe knowing that I will act as her guard until it is needed again."

Zabuza's hand tightens into a fist and his eyes narrow. "As will we."

Tension rises in the air, and Kakashi narrows his eyes, something clicking into place.

I am not unwatched, she once said, and he understands more than he ever thought he would, eyeing the possessive pale hand on her arm. She called him comrade, stayed by his side, seemed affectionate and accepting of him, but then again, she genuinely cared for Kakashi when he was terrible to her.

What truly gives it away, though, is the violent intent behind Zabuza and Haku, the frantic need to not have her alone with Orochimaru. A Kage-level shinobi should be the best protection there is, and he has only been observably cordial to her. But there is a grudge against him by those who count as her closest companions. More than simple distrust.

If she had a village, it should have been the first place they brought her to when she was hurt, but they didn't. In fact, it seemed to never cross their minds at all, trusting strangers instead of her supposed ally. It implies that they did not believe she would be safe there, under the mercy of Orochimaru. Perhaps there was a reason for it as well.

Zabuza eyes the ribbon on her throat with a strange aggression for a minute before stepping forward, and Orochimaru strengthens his grasp on her arm, casting a loaded glance at the man.

One of them gave her that scar on her neck because they didn't like what she said, Kakashi remembers, and his gut sinks into his sandals. Of course she would be flippant with Orochimaru, and in return, he would exact a price.

He had known since the first time he saw her skin that she had been held captive by somebody who had intimate knowledge of the human body. He knew that she disappeared after her defection, and this morning it came to his attention where she went. However, it escaped him until just now what exactly that meant.

Tortured by the one you had to rely on, what that must have been like... How has she not shied away and become a recluse, if all her human interaction has been so cruel?

He looks at her, and he wonders if she isn't a recluse. Her features are smoothed out, and by all appearances, she's calm and in control. Even her scent doesn't give her away, and the pulse in her neck is steady as well. She appears to be a well dressed noblewoman accompanied by her partner, not the scrambled mess of emotions he knows she must be.

Perhaps she doesn't shy away from people, but she does hide away from sincerity.

He watches, and he knows that as her escort team, they should be doing their jobs, but he also realizes that there are too many stories

he does not yet know, and there are things she wants to keep from the genin. She would have brought Team Seven along gladly if she truly felt safe with Orochimaru, but the fact remains that she slipped both her own unit and his as well.

It's even more incentive to remain as a group. He needs everyone where he can see them, to monitor them. "Ah, apologies, but the mission does state to remain in the company of you throughout your stay," he states with false cheer, and for a moment, her gaze turns so icy he could swear he feels a chill.

"I'm not letting you out of my sight for a single second," Naruto affirms with a sharp nod.

She doesn't speak again, letting herself be led away by the group, but her dark eyes do stray to Gaara. She feels a hollowness in her chest, and she remembers when he was small, so very small, alone on a swingset.

The Sand Siblings watch on as the group that gathered leaves together. Something needy and yearning inside Gaara wishes they would stay, but he has to think it over, discuss what has already happened. He needs time, and he is quietly thankful that she recognized that.

"Come on," Temari says quietly, her hand a grounding presence at his shoulder. "Let's get settled in and make sure we have everything ready for the exams."

"Yah, I mean if anything, we have to try harder now. Did you see the Sound team? They looked *brutal* ." Kankuro shakes his head. "And that genin team was already escorting high-profile customers? Konoha must be crazy."

"I don't think it was paid for. I think there's more going on than we really understand," Temari cautions as she leads them onwards.

Aneue is taking on more than she can deal with, Gaara thinks. He doesn't know how he knows this, or how to feel about her at the moment. In fact, only one thing is sure: he's glad that Temari and Kankuro are by his side. He would hate to deal with this alone.

Haku paces back and forth on the floor in front of her, wearing down the mats. "How could you be so *irresponsible*? " he says despairingly. "You said you were just taking a nap, and to see you walking around as if your health wasn't in such a state-"

She wishes she could abscond and not hear this, but Orochimaru quite literally left her in the dust with a stare that clearly told her he was endlessly amused. The Sound Three had gone with him as well, shooting her confused glances.

'Act as her guard' her ass, he just didn't want Sound's reputation to be damaged by a full-out confrontation in the streets. He was being a bastard, using her health as a convenient scapegoat and leaving her to the wolves after reminding her of their little attendance at the soirée later.

He'd better not think she didn't notice his very careful examination of Sasuke either. She *knows* him, and as much as they have argued about it, he knows her stance on it. He has all of eternity to wait for an Uchiha body, and snatching the very last known one right now is just hasty and short-sighted. She'll do her job if he will step back, but so help her, if he even lays a finger on that boy-

"We cut the training session short, you know, because I had a feeling you would try this. I always knew you were sneaky, nee-san, but I didn't think you were stupid," Naruto chastises her.

She watches with dead eyes as the two continue to scold her, and she guesses that maybe it's better than being anxious about Gaara. Still, she would rather be alone right now to mope, but fat chance of that happening. She could definitely outrun the kids, but her escape

plans have been cut short by Zabuza and Kakashi, who sit on either side of her.

Her eyes slide to the window longingly. If only she could make it. She knows Konoha pretty well, and if she just heads south she could lose them in the residential district...

She tones the two out with the long-practiced ease of someone who has spent any amount of time near Orochimaru when he starts monologuing, and she breathes in, trying to track the pieces of herself, get the opinions from different viewpoints. But her head is strangely quiet, and she feels vaguely numb and apathetic. Still, she digs deeper, and she finds it: that sting, that tangible hurt that spreads through her limbs.

Rough hands place themselves on her cheeks, smashing them together and directing her attention forward once more. She breaks out of her trance to notice Zabuza is literally holding her head in place.

"Pay attention," he orders, and she makes a flippant noise, smacking his arms with the back of her hand. The sound of it interrupts the two worrying brats and makes Sasuke and Sakura flinch in sympathy.

Zabuza doesn't even wince.

She groans. "I get it, I get it! You were worried and whatever. Enough already, I'm a grown woman."

The fingers on her face tighten for a millisecond, and she flashes her teeth in warning. She won't back down if he wants to make this physical, in fact, she's almost begging for it at this point. A fight would be familiar.

Haku shakes his head. "Do you just not care that you could relapse?"

Ryuishi rolls her eyes. He's being dramatic, and to be honest, she cares insomuch that it would be a huge pain in her ass. That's all.

She knocks Zabuzza's hands free at last, and she feels a prickle of irritation run down her neck. It would be so easy to get angry right now, to lash out. She feels it swim just underneath her laziness, the need to maim and draw blood. Zabuzza tenses under the weight of her eyes, like he can feel it as well.

"What was so important that you had to go out?" Naruto presses, standing shoulder-to-shoulder with Haku, and she lets out a heavy huff through her nose. She breaks eye contact with Zabuzza, and she can see Kakashi, tense and wary as well.

"Sunshine, that's enough," she says, and it is calm but very clearly an order.

"It's not enough! You could have been hurt, anything could have happened. Those guys in the robes-"

" *Enough*," she orders again, lacing her voice with hardness, and he stops mid-sentence.

"What I did, I did for reasons you do not need to expressly know. I thought Haku knew how to keep quiet, but his little outburst at my expense proved me wrong. You all are far too young to be allowed access to any more secrets," she informs them, and there is a distinct air of finality to the statement.

There is a round of silence after her words, and she doesn't particularly care about how everyone is staring at her. They didn't think it would be easy, did they? Juggling sixty things every single day isn't easy, never has been, and she will not just let them in on things that could have dangerous effects on them.

She is a grown woman, and she consented to a life of subterfuge and backstabbing. Hell, one might even say she chose it. The people around her, however, have no idea what it takes to play these sort of

games. They can blab all they want about helping her or not letting her be alone or whatever the hell they want, but the fact remains that Ryuishi doesn't believe them.

But there it is, the crux of the matter: not a single part of her really believes that they can do anything. She's been shouldering everything for so long now that she doesn't know what life would be like without it. She's not going to hand potentially dangerous tasks over to people she loves when she can handle it just fine. No way.

So when Orochimaru wants her company, she'll fucking hand it over, because the other option is unacceptable. They don't know him like she does, and she doesn't think that they should *have* to know him like she does. And when there are secrets that could get people killed for just knowing them, she'll be the one to collect them, because it is better that people aim for her head than theirs.

A part of her whispers that she's simplifying it too much, justifying a nonsensical need to be domineering and in control. She fully acknowledges that as well.

Naruto makes some sort of strangled noise in his throat, and he grabs Haku's wrist. For a moment, the older boy seems surprised by the act, but he is even more startled when Naruto drags him forward. The two approach Ryuishi, who sits, stern and certain, the very image of someone who is calm and collected.

Naruto knows, though. He knows instinctively that Ryuu-nee isn't okay. There is something off about her, and he doesn't like it. He doesn't like that she's being so secretive and sneaky, and that she won't tell them anything.

For the first time she's in Konoha and everyone knows about it. It should be a fun time, a happy one, with games and laughter and food, but there are all these complicated things, like politics and sad life stories and friendships and people she knows....

He just... He just...

"No," he says firmly, and then he flops onto her like he is six again. For a moment, Haku attempts to keep his balance, but Naruto drags him down with him.

He's not very smart, and he doesn't know what is going on, but he knows that Ryuu-nee needs to stop. He's too small to pin her on his own, and Haku might help, but they all need to lie on top of her so she just can't.

He doesn't know what she 'just can't' do, but he knows that she just... can't.

"Naruto," she grunts as he squirms his way up and latches on.
"Naruto, quit it."

"No," he says again. "If everyone lies on you, you can't do any more stuff. Sasuke, Sakura, help me out."

The two remaining members hesitate for a moment. They cast a questioning look towards their sensei, who shrugs, because at this point he thinks she deserves to be buried under several kilos of young ninja like a dog at the bottom of a puppy pile.

"Haku, I'll ground you," she threatens, but Haku likes this plan more and more. Yes, it lacks any elegance or sophistication, but she scared him again, and she can simply deal with it. They just have to avoid her ribs and all should be well.

Plus, Zabuza nodded his head. He agrees, so Haku's not going to be grounded.

Two more adolescents pile themselves on to her until she is on her back, covered by children. She could still move, because Yemaya knows that she's lifted heavier things in her life, but Naruto has his arms around her waist and he doesn't appear to be letting go anytime soon. Haku has sprawled out over the top of her lap, and Sasuke has claimed him as a resting spot while Sakura seems to

have thrown herself over the boys to lounge over them all. The girl reigns supreme as the queen of the pile.

"This is stupid," Ryuishi bites out weakly, not struggling at all.

"You're stupid," Naruto fires back without heat.

"Seems to be working to me," Kakashi notes, and then there is the weight of a head resting on her gut, and she scowls at the ceiling.

Then an even heavier weight settles on her legs, and the kids squawk as Zabuza claims his rightful place at the top of the stack while Misaki laughs, settling herself near Ryuishi's outstretched arm, latching on to it like a paramour.

"I'm pretty sure this has political connotations if anyone discovers us," Ryuishi comments.

"Everything with you has political connotations," Zabuza complains, while Sasuke, Sakura, and Haku flail beneath his weight. He grunts and throws an elbow, catching the Uchiha in the side, causing a rush of air to leave the boy, and the others still at the sight.

She scowls, but she lets whatever is happening continue to happen, if only because it feels just a little bit nice. Little by little, though, that scowl melts away, and her features smooth out, because it feels like... like maybe-

With a defeated sigh, she closes her eyes. She's going to continue to be sneaky, but having everybody here makes the ache in her heart lessen. She still worries about Gaara, and her chest clenches in fear when she thinks about the Akatsuki or the future to come, but it's distant.

At least, for now.

"You all weigh a metric fuckton," she mumbles.

"Too bad," Sasuke grumbles, and really, that's that.

The news hits Jiraiya like a knife to the ribs. For a moment his breath leaves him, and his happy-go-lucky smile falters, flickering out of existence like the flame of a candle.

As Konoha's spymaster, he has spent years collecting information and formulating plans to counteract any threats against his home. It's his job to travel the continent and dig up any whisper, any rumor that might be relevant, and he likes to think he's very good at his job. Perhaps one of the most competent spymasters out there.

The missive that reaches him proves that belief untrue.

The rumors of the Rakki Ryuu surfaced years ago, somewhere in what once was a small town in Wave. The town has long since prospered and grown, but when Jiraiya was there, the gloom of the winter months still hovered in the air, and thick banks of fog coated the sea. He first picked up on the story from a young girl, an akasenko from a middle-ring brothel. She was clean, her robes mended nicely, and she was free of lice and illness. He remembers she was missing a tooth at the time, and she clutched the folded paper silhouette of a dragon, the eyes inked in with paint.

"The Rakki Ryuu is like me," she told him through a lisp. "Their mama worked in a brothel too."

"Oh?" he remembers asking, "And what is the Lucky Dragon?"

He remembers the way the girl grinned and cradled the dragon in her hands. The way this little brothel girl leaned in close as if telling him a great secret.

"They're the one who cares," she confided in him. "They're gonna change everything."

It was an ominous omen, one he should have paid better attention to. At the time though, he noted the ostentatious name, patted the brat on the head, and moved on to speak with her mother, who

carried news of a blackout in Kiri. The closing off of an entire Hidden Village was much better news to him than some fairytale.

Jiraiya sees now that he should have known better, but hindsight is twenty-twenty. He was distracted, and there were movements in the shadows he was keen to keep an eye on. His teammate had just defected from home, and there was a gap in the information concerning him. There were other things to be focused on.

It was almost a year later that the figure cropped up again, and this time it was from a merchant who was complaining about the refugees in River Country. He was a grizzled bargeman, with gray in his scruff and a weathered face that had seen far too much sun. The heat of the jungle was sweltering, and the buzz of insects almost drowned him out completely.

"They set up camp pretty quick for a bunch of runaways. A few of them joined the local bars, and more set up homes by the river. Every time they see a fruit tree they look like they're about to cry," the man had whined.

"Water Country isn't exactly known for its surplus of fruit," Jiraiya had joked.

"They blend in well enough, but mark my words, there's something strange about them. They got some weird leader. Can't tell if it's a man, a woman, or a damn spirit. They say it saved their lives," his drinking partner groused, pouring himself another cup.

"Why not just ask?"

"They clam up faster than a Fire Country virgin after a first date. Don't like talking about it to strangers," the man said. "Frankly, as long as they do their jobs and keep quiet, I don't care much about it."

"Why bring it up at all?" Jiraiya asked curiously.

The man had grinned at him then, a lecherous smile full of greed. "You don't pay me to not bring details up, Toad Sage," he laughed, and Jiraiya tipped his head forward. He was right about that.

Still, it took time for the legend to grow, and it was touch-and-go trying to track it down. His sources in the brothels and working girls seemed to have dried up. He suspected for a while that there was false information being fed to him, but later, it turned out to be something else altogether.

"You've been good to us, Jiraiya-sama," a perky blond with cherry-red lips admitted. "Your patronage has seen us through hard times."

"I'm sensing a 'but' here," he complained, his eyes hard.

She smiled then, and it wasn't exactly kind. If anything, it was a sad, consolatory smile, the kind you gave to a small child after they dropped their ice cream on the ground.

"But there are better options for us now, and one patron cannot compete with them," she stated, her voice full of sympathy. "We are still allowed to pass information onto you, if it helps."

"It just is filtered and second-hand," Jiraiya grouched without heat. He looked her over again, convinced he was seeing a ghost. She looked healthier than when he last saw her, her breathing deep and even, without the wetness and strain he had heard before. In fact, it was the same thing he had been seeing in brothels for a while now. Older, healthier workers. Someone, somewhere, was keeping an eye out for the bottom rung. There was a growing sense of community in the lower classes, drawing them together and pulling them out of desperation. He wanted to be upset, but he understood. His history and coins could not buy the self-worth they seemed to carry these days.

His eyes darted over to the shrine on the street corner before he left though, decorated with garlands and paper. A dragon snarled out at

him, it's teeth bared and claws raised, and he realized he had seen something similar before.

His hunt began in earnest then, and he searched for whatever was making changes on the bottom level of society, but his resources shied away or seemed genuinely ignorant. Nobody wanted to oust their newest patron and guardian figure.

While he was busy searching for some hints on this figure, it struck again, and in Grass, Rice, and River Country schools began cropping up. Small, one-room establishments that operated after working hours, mostly without funding. There were slate boards and older texts, but it worried Jiraiya. He was all for literacy, but he knew that increasing knowledge could destabilize establishments. The rice farmer and the dockworker had no need to educate themselves, so why was somebody doing so?

He was running in circles, and more and more strange, unlikely things began happening almost at once. Kiri opened its border again, and it seemed hit by some devastating loss. The noble clans of Kiri were no more, and many shinobi and civilians seemed to be missing. There were competitors on more levels, and someone was hoarding information, seeking it out and buying it up with unseen funds. Trade was picking up in several areas, strangely choreographed to where it needed to go, and the crop in Rice was unusually high.

It was around this time he first heard the whole story of the Rakki Ryuu, from start to finish, and it made him skeptical. He began looking through what little information he could draw from the Land of Water, searching through portfolios and databases.

It was never him who discovered her real identity, though. No, that honor belonged to the student of his student, one Hatake Kakashi.

"You have to be kidding me," Jiraiya had said, staring down the teenager in front of him. "You are telling me the murderess from the Mist, one of the Kiri no Kaijuu, ripped off her shirt in the middle of a fight."

"Sir, I thought you might be more concerned with how the Hunter-nin reacted, or how she disappeared while being held captive, and how *she got into Konoha* -" Kakashi began, but Jiraiya cut him off with a swipe of his hand before steeping his fingers together.

"Hatake," Jiraiya asked, "Did you, or did you not, fight a woman in her bra?"

"Actually, she took all the garments off and was bare chested-"

Jiraiya twitched, expression foreboding, and the young man halted in his explanation. He felt sweat drip down his forehead as the older man stood up to pace, going over details yet again.

"So this woman helps you when you are drunk, fights you soaking wet with nothing to cover her breasts, gets away both times only to show up again and *save your life*, " the sannin emphasized. "Then she appears in you apartment dressed down, with information at hand, and *tries to read literotica with you?!* "

Kakashi flinched as Jiraiya's voice rose, demanding an answer. He wouldn't have stated it anything like the man just did. It was obvious she was unstable and dangerous, but he made her sound... weird. Still, it was technically true.

"Yes?" Kakashi answered, unsure.

"You are the luckiest bastard I have ever met," Jiraiya told him frankly. "You have a chance to build an alliance with a powerful free radical who is literally *throwing* herself at you. It is in your job description to take advantage of this situation. It's your duty to your country, man."

"He's right," the Sandaime concurred. "Bring her in by whatever means necessary."

At the time, it had seemed like it had wrapped itself up fairly nicely, a answer that provided itself, but there remained variables. The

growing independence of Suna, the situation in Rice, and to the east, a strange shutdown in Ame.

He had been transfixed by the problems in Ame, probing for knowledge. He chased after rumors of his old teammates and picked up on the unease growing in Iwa and Kiri. Years passed and the rumors grew. He hunted down everything he could, sure that the Rakki Ryuu problem was under control. After all, it seemed to quiet down after that, and when he saw the dragon statues or heard the stories, he inwardly smiled because she was allied with Konoha. One could even say she was... in bed with it.

Only, as it turns out, she wasn't.

Right after finally gathering information on the organization he had been tracking for years, he received his missive. He almost dropped it before finishing when he discovered she had warned them of something that sounded very similar. But the coded message took a turn for the darker side when it mentioned his lost teammates, and he headed towards home immediately.

He mentally turns over the thoughts once more, and he groans at the amount of pain they cause him. Konoha had been had. The entire continent had been had.

The blood-stained murderess of the Mist was wasted on the battlefield, no matter how effective she was as the Chigiri no Ningyo. The sort of dedication and patience it took to weave a web this large, to cast a net this huge, well, it makes his head hurt just thinking about it. The longest type of con, crafted with the sort of devious cunning that he finds himself both respecting and detesting at once. Even as a compromised agent she is dangerous, because anyone who wields this much influence is.

"You're sure that smear tactics won't work?" he asks again, his jaw gritted. His two teammates, united. The threat of unsaid secrets hanging over Konoha's head like an executioner's axe, and a sticky mess with more triggers than an Iwa minefield.

"They won't," his teacher confirms tiredly, looking old and worn. He hangs his head in his hands, exhausted by the efforts he has spent on gathering everything they know about Orochimaru and his partner into one compilation. "Much of her sway with the common people is how human she is. They deify her, yes, but they also relate to her. She retains her hold no matter how many mistakes we reveal, and as our ally on paper, a strike against her in the noble courts hurts us by association."

"The Daimyo already dislike her as well, but if we can prove that she isn't Orochimaru's pet, they might order action against her," theorizes the white haired man.

His sensei looks up from his wrinkled palms, and his hazel eyes seem distant and glazed. He's never look so conflicted, so defeated.

"Can you imagine what would happen next, Jiraiya? How the populations would react to the open condemnation of their hero when there is already so much tension between castes? How it would tear our world apart, and brother would fight against brother, families and towns split on their loyalty? It would be war like we have never seen it before, not Hidden Village against Hidden village, but everyone. No man, woman, or child would be untouched. Not even the Era of Warring Clans can compare to the devastation that would follow," Sarutobi laments.

Jiraiya runs a hand through his hair, breathing out a shaky sigh. He doesn't know what to do, where to turn. Every action they can take is laced with heavy prices that they cannot afford to pay.

"You're telling me we are at the mercy of an unstable Kirigakure defector with a history of trauma and mental instability and an amoral Kage level fighter with a grudge," Jiraiya states flatly. "Possibly two Kage-level fighters, considering what Tsunade-hime has to do with all of this."

The prognosis is grim.

"They all have reason to wish Konoha ill," his teacher confesses. "The way we dealt with her as an agent left much to be desired. I underestimated her political and economic power and treated her as a regular missing-nin. Perhaps better, given her information network, but I attempted to exploit things I should not have."

Jiraiya levels an unimpressed stare at his teacher. He can understand on one level, but on another-

"You didn't. Please tell me you did not threaten the unstable, traumatized veteran who holds our trade in the palm of her hands," he deadpans.

His sensei winces, and Jiraiya feels his blood run cold. He bursts up from his seat so fast the chair topples over, slamming both palms on the desk.

"Sensei, what did you *do* ? Please tell me you just threatened her, *please* ."

The Sandaime looks remorseful and grim, his thin lips twisted downward in shame. "I'm afraid I did much worse, Jiraiya. Knowing she holds little value in her own continued existence, I strove to threaten one she valued much more, and she was very displeased when her teammate was brought up," his teacher confesses, and Jiraiya feels fear and anger course through his veins, mingling with wild disbelief.

"Are you stupid, sensei? This whole time Konoha has been manipulating her by her emotional dependence on Hatake, a man who she met later in life. You threatened her teammate? The one she went to the Academy with? The one she went to war with? You know the stories of the Kiri no Kaijuu. I sat here and presented the files by hand. They were inseparable, the best unit Kiri produced in generations, an example of teamwork even we would have boasted about," Jiraiya berates, his voice shaking.

"I had no other leverage!" his sensei protests, his hand meeting his desk with a thump. "To acknowledge her as an equal would be frowned upon by our peers and would have cast Konoha as a lesser nation. She is restricted by her caste and blood. To assault her directly was courting warfare, I did what I thought was best!"

"You damned yourself, that's what you did! She's unstable and dangerous, and threatening her teammate is something all her psych evaluations agree is an action she will never forgive. Going public at this time with her allies and identity gives her the upper hand. There had to be another way," Jiraiya snaps.

The Sandaime looks at him then, really looks. The old man loses his facade, and the chakra burbles around him, restless and uneasy.

"She has Naruto," the old man intones, and he freezes. His limbs lock into place, and his focus on the old man is unsettlingly intense.

" *What?* " Jiraiya's voice has dropped to a furious whisper.

"Your godson. She raised him. While she was sneaking in to meet with Hatake, she was also raising the boy, showering him with affection. Giving him praise and love, raising him as her own. Konoha may have the boy in name, but she holds his heart."

He feels like he's choking on his own self-loathing, and he tastes it in the bile in the back of his tongue. This girl, the woman, she got close enough to his student's son, the boy he promised to watch out for, to *manipulate* him. The thought of it makes him weak in the knees.

"That is the corner I was backed in, Jiraiya," his sensei informs him solemnly. "She is subverting loyalty out from under Konoha. She has been for years, and now she holds the Kyuubi Jinchuuriki and Minato's legacy in her palms. It's no one-way street, to be sure. She very nearly died keeping the boy and his team from harm, but I was desperate. I am still desperate," the Hokage says gravely.

Jiraiya is still shaky as he kicks the chair to it's proper position. He feels numb and broken, because she is too close. She's too close to everything, and she's only drawing everybody further in.

(He failed, he failed, he always fails his students-)

He mirrors his sensei when he goes into his seat, slumping and holding his face in his hands. It's obvious what Kiri is attempting to do, clearing her old teammate's name and positioning him so close to her. In the eyes of the daimyo, she'll never be truly accepted into courts as she is now, but a marriage between her and a high-ranking shinobi like one of the Seven Swordsmen would not only tie her forever to the home country she abandoned, but give it access to her benevolence and goodwill. In a way, it could be argued that Konoha is doing the same with Hatake.

But Orochimaru has already bound her to Otogakure, and as the Otokage and noble representative, he has immeasurable sway over her and her people. The same could be said for her. However, as his one-time teammate, Jiraiya can confirm Orochimaru will attempt to sway her in whatever direction he feels benefits him most, regardless of her wishes.

At this point, Jiraiya isn't sure what Konoha can do, because they have as much leverage as possible. There is a stalemate until Orochimaru moves once again, and they can only hope he does not strike too hard. Knowing the man as he does, he would say it is impossible.

The only way to counteract Otogakure now is to figure out their motives. For Orochimaru, it is the same thirst for power and drive to learn that it has always been, but what is her goal? What does she want?

Jiraiya takes a deep breath in, before letting it go in a long, drawn-out gust.

He thinks that it's about time somebody asked.

AN: Alright, a little late, but RL has me by the balls. Same with my beta. We get to see a lot here, mostly how Gaara continues to make good, healthy life choices in his relationships, because jumping on that crazy train is the last thing he needs. Ryuishi shows surprising maturity and respects his choice, but also immediatly reverts back into repression and disassociation. Kakashi realizes that Orochimaru is still a douche lord and Ryuishi as some seriously fucked up relationships, and Zabuza refuses to let that shit fly. Haku, Naruto, Sakura, and Sasuke are slowly learning there is a gap between them and the older generation, and Orchimaru is fucking delighted by the drama. Also! Jiraiya! Jiraiya who doesn't like Ryuishi very much at all! Jiraiya who is wise and smart but also stupid! Almost like another intelligence agent we know.

Next chapter has the three sanin re-unite and plans are revealed, also Ryuishi and Sarutobi are there for reasons! Ryuishi trains genin! Kisame and the Akatsuki?!

Shout out to my lurkers, bless, and also my favs and followers. Loud, vigorous, consensual hugs for my reviewers, who fuel my creativity and nurture me.

Everybody, as always, should join me in thanking my beta enbi. They continously have a busy schedule, and they don't have to do the beta work, but they do, so we thank them.

Question: What will Ryuishi think of Jiraiya? Or What is the snake sannin planning?

In Which Poor Choices are Made

I do not own Naruto.

Ryuishi thinks that the setting for the ' *diplomatic conference* ' between Konohagakure and Otogakure could be a bit more cinematic.

For one, it should at least be night outside. Ideally it would be twilight, with overcast skies that threaten rain, and lightning ominously jumping from cloud to cloud. The leaves in the trees would rattle like old bones, and the distant crack-boom of thunder would sound every now and then.

It would be in a secret room lit only by open flame torches, with dark wood paneling and no windows. Shadows would dance dramatically on everyone's faces, and for no apparent reason there would be a spider in the corner to illustrate some crazy metaphor of plans and entanglement. There would also be some sort of bug being eaten by the spider. Preferably a fly.

However, because reality likes to ruin her daydreams, the setting is nothing like that.

It's late morning, and nobody was even aware this meeting was taking place until like, four hours ago. She's pretty sure not even the Hokage was aware he was going to have this time slot open, because he looks worn and ragged, like he's been pulling all-nighters for the last week. Sitting behind, and a little bit to the side of him, is the last loyal Sannin, who is either glaring at her or sleeping with his eyes open in the most unsettling way she has ever seen.

Jiraiya is a lot bigger than she imagined he'd be, if she's honest. Dude is fucking tall and broad as shit. He has at least six centimeters on Zabuzza, and even sitting in his sloppy seiza he takes up a good

portion of space. What space his body isn't taking up, his hair is consuming, because that man has a *mane*. A terrible, tangled, poorly cut and groomed mane, yes, but it looks clean at least. If it were her, she'd have drowned her locks in about half a bottle of frizz serum and done about seven moisturizing treatments in a row, but to each their own. It's not like she finds it low-key distracting or anything.

(She does. Did he even fucking try? Look at all of those split ends!)

In comparison, she and Orochimaru look positively glamorous. Actually, they might look pretty glamorous without the comparison, because when they found out there was a meeting taking place, they both had primped like a couple of peacocks. Absolutely everyone from Team Seven had assured her that that's what she was doing, while Zabuza and Haku had lounged about with the long-suffering air of two people who had lived with her for the past four years.

Tsunade had come in for her daily check-up and eyed her with a strange sort of amusement, noting that she had finally found what she and Orochimaru held in common.

"You two are a pair of vain schemers," she had said.

Which was a gross oversimplification and also too close to the truth.

Tsunade herself looks casual and unruffled, which is the best anybody could ask for from her, considering she wasn't really supposed to be part of the Otogakure delegation, but had joined them without word.

Outside the high window, presumably plastered with privacy seals, the sun shines bright and beautiful, and the sky is so blue it almost hurts to look at. Occasionally a group of fat clouds pass overhead. There is also a distinct lack of infernal wind, but a decidedly peaceful breeze does pick up now and then to ruffle the greenery.

The room isn't lit with open torches, and it's not dark stained wood. The walls are a pleasant mix of vaguely-colored (maybe beige?) plaster and light pine paneling, and the floors are comprised of clean tatami. There is a table between them all, on which a teapot rests, steam gently curling out of its spout. A clean white light comes from overhead, but mostly, the sun illuminates everything from the window.

At this point, it's more the set of a Studio Ghibli film than the scene of a politically and emotionally charged confrontation.

Which is the excuse she's going to use if anybody calls her out for looking a little too relaxed. She's a little nervous, yah, but also, it's been a long couple of days, and she's kinda glad to not have a squad of people breathing down her neck. Team Seven and the Kiri delegation aren't allowed in right now, and she's super relieved. They've been following her everywhere, and she does mean *everywhere*. She's never gonna be able to forget all of them bursting into the fancy little onsen that came with their accommodations, and then the Konoha-nin tripping all over themselves trying to back out while she and Misaki laughed it up. Zabuza and Haku didn't even try and make excuses, they just gave her that 'I'm watching you' gesture and headed out to guard the exits.

It's cute how they think they can keep track of her, though. Seriously, it's like they forget she's been sneaking around guards and ninja villages for the large majority of her life. If she wants to go fucking train at three in the morning to burn off some stress, then by Tsai Shen Yeh, *she is going to train*. It's not like anybody is going to know about it but her, probably Tsunade, and definitely Wood Boy.

(Good to finally know the identity of one of her Anbu watchers.)

The sound of liquid hitting the inside of a cup draws her attention, and she notices that Tsunade has begun to pour herself a cup of tea. Ryuishi could probably go on about the connotations of such a move, but she's fairly certain the other woman is just thirsty.

"So," Tsunade says. "Are we gonna have a conference, or are we going to stare at each other all day?"

In that moment, Ryuishi feels that inappropriate crush she thought she didn't have on Tsunade spark to life inside her chest. Good to know that all it took was a single blunt statement for her to get on board that train.

"I believe that it is traditional that all allied members sit on the same side of the table first," Jiraiya says pointedly, and Ryuishi smothers a snicker.

"With how I hear Konoha has been acting, I'm not sure I want to be associated with the Leaf as of now," Tsunade says with a cold, cutting vehemence that makes the men on the other side of the table flinch.

"Hime-" Jiraiya tries, but Tsunade doesn't even let him start. She cuts him off by slapping her hand on the table so hard it cracks.

"Do you even know what the village stands accused of, Jiraiya? Have you have any clue what sort of things it has been doing in the shadows?" she demands.

"I know it can't be as bad as experimenting on infants!" Jiraiya protests loudly. "You are sitting beside a baby killer, Hime! I don't know what he's told you, but it can't-"

"IT WAS ORDERED, JIRAIYA!" Tsunade bellows, and the whole room goes deathly still for a moment.

Ryuishi lazily watches a leaf sway in the wind outside. It's a good thing this room is sealed, because Tsunade has a serious set of pipes on her.

" *What?* " Jiraiya whispers.

"Indeed," Orochimaru hums faux-nonchalantly. "Isn't that right, sensei?"

Sarutobi looks like somebody has slapped him in the face, his weathered skin sinking into outrage at the accusation. Then the rage melts, and the pieces slot together inside his mind. Ryuishi can literally see them snap into place.

"Danzō," he breathes, and in that moment, Ryuishi pities the old man. He looks more betrayed and hurt than anyone she has ever seen.

"Elder councilman Danzō," Orochimaru agrees. "How else would I receive the First Hokage's genetic samples? Do you think I simply procured sixty infants on a whim, snatching them out of the air while also on the active missions roster? That I built my own laboratory right under your nose, bought and built the necessary equipment on a jounin teacher's salary, with no one noticing it at all?"

"I..." the old man starts, gobsmacked.

"You what? Gave your childhood friend power over a secret organization and turned your head so you wouldn't have to watch what he did with it? Indirectly sanctioned his actions by allowing him command? Never once stopped to believe that I wasn't guilty?" spits Orochimaru. He shakes his head derisively. "I find myself surprised that I ever thought you might. You were always quick to believe the worst in me, ever since I was a boy. It was often stated that I was 'too ambitious, too callous'."

"You were my student. You were precious to me, but there was and still is darkness in your heart. You could have come to me, could have asked about the orders. You had to have known, Orochimaru," Sarutobi pleads.

"Really?" Ryuishi snorts, and maybe she's being flippant, but this is a bit too much. "As if he wasn't sanctioned to do worse things before? We're all veterans here, and none of us walk with our hands clean,

nevermind our consciences. I don't know how things were done in Konoha, but what I know is that when a ninja was ordered to wipe out an area, to destroy a village or town, or to take out a threat, they did it, right down to the very last living person. Are you telling me that before then, you did not order the Sannin to do such a thing? Are you saying you know the ages of each and every one of their victims, and none of them were young?"

Because Ryuishi can't say that. She can't even begin to name the people she has directly killed, let alone those she has indirectly ended. She knows the weight of her sins. She knows it like the scar on her throat and the guilt in her heart. No one has a moral high ground in this room. No one.

All eyes turn to her, and she gazes at the cup in Tsunade's hand with jealousy. Maybe she should pour herself one, but then she might have to pee, and who knows how long they will be here?

"See, the thing is, most of the things we will discuss are patently unprovable at their core. It's not like you kept hard evidence of such orders being given, because to do so would go against the nature of the orders. You could interrogate your council member, but from what I know he is a tricky bastard with a thousand excuses and reasons and escape plans up his sleeve. He probably even thought he was doing was best. Orochimaru can never prove that he was ordered to do the experiments, but he can prove that he was named a missing-nin. He can also prove the Fire daimyo accepted reparation payments in atonement, and all in all, we are allies on paper."

Silence takes over the room, and Ryuishi reaches out, deciding that a cup of tea is completely necessary. Her hands peek out of the sweeping sleeve of her hanfu and grasp the teapot gently.

"If we break it down even further, though, we aren't allies-not really. There's huge amounts of animosity and distrust, and a gigantic power struggle as well. Konoha doesn't like Orochimaru, and it certainly doesn't like me. But that's really too bad, because no matter

how you feel about us or Otogakure, we have you by the balls. We went through all the right avenues to make sure of it. Orochimaru has settled into the noble courts and is well accepted as a Kage. He leads a good fighting force, and he has the daimyo on his side. Furthermore, I control a large portion of your trade and a huge amount of your diet, not to mention I appeal to the masses. You could independently, without the sanction of your lord, spark a war. You might beat us, but you would be shamed by the courts and the people, and the cost would be devastating. So, it comes to a shit-flinging contest, who holds more secrets on who," she says, pouring the cup and letting it warm her hands.

"Oh?" Jiraiya says, deadly calm and dangerously steady. "And what sort of secrets could possibly rival the fact that Otogakure is run by an amoral madman and a murderess?"

"I wonder how people would feel about Konoha would feel if they knew the truth behind the Uchiha massacre," Orochimaru hisses, and the room goes still again. It seems everybody knows that truth, or, rather, they think they know the truth. After all, only one of them was actually there for the event that took place.

Ryuishi takes a sip of her tea. Konoha is in a bad place. Oto has been prepping for this for years.

"We were supposed to be better than the others," Tsunade says, fury lacing her words. "The Hokage was supposed to be honorable, a position that upheld the Will of Fire. *How could you, sensei?*"

The man in question looks down at his hands, because though he may not have given the order, he knew. He sanctioned the action, the use of the young boy, and... and he thought they had more time. He thought that he knew Danzō better, but he's learning now that he never knew the man at all.

As the Kage, the responsibility for it lies on his shoulders. The tragedy of the Uchiha Clan is his weight to bear.

His hazel eyes look up and take in the young woman who sips her tea, and he thinks of the events in Grass. While he feels isolated and alone, he knows he is not the only leader in the room with regrets in regards to their people.

"I have made many mistakes, and I will carry them with me all my life," he says lowly. He notices that his students do not seem to react, but Watanabe seems to wince, clutching her cup tighter.

Yes, he thinks tiredly. She knows this well, that the only thing one can do is attempt to atone for the rest of their life .

"That's not good enough!" Tsunade barks. "You abandoned your student, and we abandoned our teammate. You let a boy slaughter his own family, and you left another alone and unguided to be demonized. A council member has committed heinous crimes against all of the Land of Fire right under your nose, and all you can say is that you have regrets?!"

"Sensei," Jiraiya cuts in, and Hiruzen closes his eyes. He never thought he would see the day the Sannin were reunited. To think, all it took to bring them back together was their shame in him.

"What was I to do?" he pleads.

"Better," Tsunade growls.

"It doesn't matter," Orochimaru rasps coldly, detached from the frail old man in front of him. To be broken by so little. Truly, he thought it would take more than this. "What is done is done."

"If it's done then why are you here?" demands Jiraiya, lashing out at his ex-teammate.

Orochimaru smiles poisonously, and victory taste like ash and bitter herbs in his mouth. He knows the answer they will come to in time.

The weight of the Hokage's failures are too much. He and the girl beside him built their nation in spite of their reputations, but Konoha is different. Konoha can crumble under these failures.

For them, there is only one option: a new shadow must rise from the Land of Fire.

"Isn't this illegal?" Sasuke asks skeptically, his arms crossed and his brows furrowed. It's been a long week and a half since Watanabe woke up, and the world seems to be a bit more of a surreal place. Naruto's sister has a weird way of making reality suddenly seem questionable, and Sasuke is certain he doesn't care for it.

"Mildy," her voice admits from behind the tangle of bushes. Her ornate Rice Country robes dangle from a tree branch, stretched out and far away from where they can be stained. Ever so often, one of the long sleeves will sway in the breeze.

"How illegal is mildly illegal?" Sakura questions from her guard position to the right.

"Irrelevant, as genin would be the last to face the fallout of this. Actually, I'll be surprised if anyone starts some shit right now. I'm pretty sure I have free reign to do whatever the fuck I want so long as it isn't like, a crazy heinous act, senseless violence against nonconsenting parties, or a crime against humanity," she informs the teams. There is a pause for a moment, and then she speaks again. "Nobody tell the Otokage what I'm doing, though."

"Snitches get stitches," Naruto agrees solemnly, taking up the last point to the left.

"Who consents to senseless violence? Isn't that inherently not possible?" Sakura wonders, and the bushes rustle and shake as the woman emerges from them, pinning up her hair. She dons the outfit she wore in River Country, if significantly cleaner and less worn.

For a single moment, Sasuke sees her as she was, soaking wet and covered in blood, gasping for air and choking on crimson bubbles. He freezes, and the image of flames overtakes him, the smell of smoke-

"Oh, you sweet children," the woman says, and she ruffles Sasuke's hair, shaking him from the memories. "I was born in Kiri. Our motto might have well been senseless violence."

"But consensual?" Sakura asks.

"Sometimes," Zabuza replies bluntly from his place in the shade. He appears to be frustratedly penning out reports, something he is long out of practice with.

"Hopefully these days it's more of a 'most of the time' thing," Kakashi drawls, busy reading his orange book.

Watanabe claps her hands together and rubs them together gleefully, enjoying her time away from the political nonsense and angst that seems to be clogging up everything at the moment. She's not even going to begin to think about how the Chuunin Exams begin in two short days and Gaara has yet to acknowledge her again, nope. She's going to get out of her fancy clothes, get out in the sun, and fucking *move*. No more sitting around drinking tea for her. No more lengthy talks or boring healing sessions or catching up on work. Nope. Activity time.

"So!" she starts cheerfully, "What do you little nerds know so far? Because I know where Haku is at with his training, but you three seem to be all over the place."

"Hey Naruto, have you ever seen your older sister try and throw a kunai?" Kakashi pipes up, bristling at her dig. He's done a fine job catching them up. He realizes their training could be a bit more balanced, and he's been trying to fix it since River, but it's only been a month.

At least he caught it before he put them through the Chuunin Exams. That would have been a tragedy.

Zabuza snorts at the comment, then groans as he realizes the action has left an ink drop on his papers. Haku quietly hands him another sheet without a word.

Ryuishi flippantly signs something that would make a sailor blush at him, which he returns with a casual salute.

Sakura eyes the two of them with a crafty smile, sending a smug glance at Haku. She might not know what they are saying, but she understands they have their own language. In return Haku frowns and subtly gestures his head at Zabuza.

"Sunshine, ignore your teacher. A man with a face like his should never be trusted," Ryuishi says.

"You've seen his face?" Sasuke says in wonderment, and the woman sends him a quizzical glance, like she can't believe he even asked that.

Sakura grows even more smug.

"Have you seen Zabuza's face?" Naruto blurts out in excitement.

"Of course. I mean, they are wearing skintight masks. It's not like they're hiding much anyways," she says nonchalantly. Here Sakura seems to deflate a bit, and Haku sends her a satisfied smirk.

"So he doesn't have big lips?" Naruto presses.

"He has a fat mouth, but no, his lips are not disproportionately large," she informs the team. "Conversation aside, though, I thought I might join in on the training today, but as it appears that you are more interested in asking about faces than learning, I might just go hang out by myself."

"No!" Naruto protests. "Teach us some really cool ninjutsu! How did you do that thing with all the fog? Or with all the water, when it rose up from the river like ' *whoosh!* '" He emphasizes his words by making a motion with his hands and some sort of sliding dive. Sasuke watches it with a sort of detached tiredness, and Sakura roll her eyes.

Ryuishi just smiles with fondness, and she pops her hip to the side, crossing her arms across her chest. They are a long ways away from sealless element manipulation, if they ever reach it. The affinity a person has to have to achieve those results must be super strong, not to mention the amount of chakra control it takes.

While they might get more than one element, they won't be able to do what she does with hers. Ryuishi is a Suiton user through and through, right down to her bones.

"Well, I don't know about ninjutsu, but if you want to be ninja, there is something else you should learn. Naruto, can you really do kage bunshin?" she inquires curiously.

"You bet! I can make a whole bunch!" he declares, and he forms his cross seal. Ryuishi wants to take a moment and say there should actually be a sequence in here, a way that he forms or molds his energy, but being who he is, he apparently doesn't need one. Still, it's sort of baffling the way there is a puff of smoke, and then suddenly there isn't just one Naruto, but eleven.

"Check it out, dattebayo!" the original proclaims, and several of them snicker, striking various poses. She eyes them all enviously, because she has more than enough chakra to perform the technique, but she's never been taught. Orochimaru forbid her from doing so, because her already fractured psyche would be split worse if she were given the ability to manifest them. All the pieces and parts in her head are to remain there, not be given bodies of their own.

Still, to be able to cross-examine herself, or to have a subservient clone with all her knowledge and half her chakra... It's tempting.

"What do you think is among the most founding principles of being a ninja?" she asks, and this time, Kakashi looks up, closing his book.

"Intelligence," Sakura says automatically.

"Strength," says Sasuke.

"Loyalty," chorus the Narutos.

Ryuishi nods her head in understanding, shifting her position around. The three seem captivated by her lesson, and she knows it is one that must be given.

"Those are the ones the Land of Fire teaches, yes, but do you know the others? What of Kumo's principles, or Iwa's?" she wonders out loud. "The lesson I want to impart today is awareness of what values are held in highest regards in what countries. For instance, Kumo's principles are Service, Wisdom, and Power. Iwa's are Devotion, Creativity, and Sturdiness. Notice that they all could be considered the same, but there are subtle differences in the wording. It gives a different connotation altogether."

"What does that stuff have to do with anything?" one of the Narutos ask, crossing his arms behind his head.

Ryuishi levels him with an unimpressed stare, because she thought she raised him a bit better than that. However, she probably shouldn't have been raising him in the first place and fucked more than one thing up.

"Understanding is important, no matter if it is a friend you care about or an opponent on the battlefield. If you can name what shaped them, pinpoint what drives them, and know their values, you can reach them, or react to them, in a more efficient manner," she says succinctly.

"What were Kiri's values?" Sakura needles.

Ryuishi grits her jaw, because those values could lead to where she is today. If properly applied, she could trace how they affected each member of her unit, and every ninja Kirigakure produced. In essence, they were harmless, but when taken to extremes, they became warped and perverted as all things tend to do.

"Obedience, Perception, and Ruthlessness," she recites.

"I don't get it," Naruto comments after a second of silence. "You said they were the same, but that doesn't sound the same at all."

"Loyalty and obedience," Sasuke begins hesitantly. "Loyalty is an allegiance to a person place or ideal, and it is shown through service to that cause. Service is given in the shinobi ranks, and it is shown by obeying the laws and superiors."

Something seems to click in the blond's head, and he makes an silent face of realisation, slamming his fist against his palm. "So they're are all pieces and parts of the same thing!" he says.

It's Sakura that seems to really catch on though, her face lined and contemplative. For a moment she worries her bottom lip between her teeth before tucking a strand of pink hair behind her ear.

"They aren't, though. Strength is a quality, and power is the ability to direct or influence things, but ruthlessness is a way of using those two. Also, strength is generally seen as a positive thing, power is marked by whoever has it, and ruthlessness has a negative implication associated with it in most cases. In fact, you could argue them all either way," she counters.

Ryuishi levels appraising eyes on the girl, because that is the kind of thinking the ninja ranks seem to lack. A balance, recognizing the tones and nuances of things.

"Very good, kiddo," she praises. "You might actually last a bit."

"Last?" Sasuke echoes.

Ryuishi smiles, a cheery thing, and she waggles her fingers at them.

"We're going to play a game, all of us, except for Zabuza who has paperwork to do. You three have one goal, and that is to survive. Meanwhile, every time I attack, I will announce a word or phrase directly associated with how I will attack or reward you. You have to interpret it in time, or fall victim to a penalty. If you attack, you must do the same," Ryuishi says. "Kakashi's job is to make sure I don't go over what your level is."

"I also make sure she doesn't push herself," Kakashi adds on, thinking about her game. It seems to be training several areas at once. A physical contest demanding that they match wits and understand their opponent that also uses a punishment and reward system. Seeing how their teammate interprets the very same directions will allow them to recognize how different people see situations as well.

"I will join in as well," Haku volunteers softly, and Ryuishi feels a rush of affection and warmth for the boy.

This can't have been an easy time for him, none of it. She's not so self-centered to think only about herself, and every time he opens his mouth to speak, or he performs an action, she becomes prouder and prouder of him.

When he first came to live with them, he was quiet and withdrawn, always waiting for orders and filled with melancholy. He had never spoken or questioned what he was told, only giving his best to satisfy any desires he thought Zabuza and her might have. She thinks it's because he was afraid that if he didn't please them, if he didn't fulfill a certain role, than they might end up like his first parents.

Now... now Haku is defining his own role, figuring out who he is, and what he wants. He's not afraid to speak out against any ideas he doesn't agree with, and he's socializing with peers. She'll be the first to admit that it makes her heart incredibly glad to see him brush the invisible grass and dirt from his clothes and stand beside children

who are closer to him in age. If Zabuza's quick glance up and pleased expression is anything to go by, he is satisfied as well.

Haku occasionally mingled with his age group when they traveled, but he never seemed to take to an actual group the same way he seems to have adopted Team Seven.

She looks over them as they stand in front of her, waiting for training to begin. Team Seven doesn't even think twice about Haku coming to stand in formation, Next to Sakura and the gang of Narutos. She feels something lodge in her throat at the sight of them. It's just so... so...

"Hand," she croaks out, attempting not to cry.

Immediately, Sasuke puts up his guard, assuming hand relates to fist, and fist to punch. Sakura glues her eyes to Ryuishi's hands as well, Haku simply backs out of striking range, and the gang of orange-clad clones looks confused. She lashes out with a bone-breaking kick and hits one of the clones so hard in the palm that had it been a real hand, it would have shattered. Instead, it squawks and busts into smoke.

The children stare at the place where the clone once was with wide eyes. Well, Haku seems unsurprised, but he lives with her.

"Please don't kick any of them that hard," Kakashi says calmly from his place in the shade. He is standing now, preparing to intercede should things go awry.

"They're just so cute," she whispers, below the range of anybody's hearing.

"Nee-san is really strong," says the real Naruto, shaking his hand and trying to dispel the residual shock.

"I don't think this is a safe game," Sakura says with a new-found hesitance, edging away from the kunoichi who appears to be wiping

a stray tear out of her eye.

"Wait until we play 'anything is a weapon'," Haku chimes in with a happy smile.

Sasuke squints, still in a defensive stance, rethinking the wisdom of training with a madwoman who seems to think nothing of shaking things to their very foundations.

"A fucker with another fucker," she states cryptically, and the team moves as one, leaping away from her. Blond headed clones attempt to flee, but she weaves through them like water, sneaking around to their back. She's faster, sneakier, and knows exactly how this game is played. There is no escape.

Sakura squeals as she feels hands snap around her wrists, and she lashes out with her foot. She kicks the woman's thigh, but her legs shrieks out in protest, because there is something harder than a leg wrapped around her limb, a metal of some sort hidden by the fabric.

The woman, who was dressed as a queen and spoke with grace and dignity now spins Sakura around so fast that she feels her stomach rebel. The world blurs as they become some sort of human cyclone.

Kakashi watches with amusement as that spiraling tornado of kunoichi collides with the group of clones, cutting them down. The remaining boys form a rough triangle in defense, but it crumbles when the youngest girl is released mid-spin, and her body is sent whirling at them, knocking them down.

"This is insane!" Sasuke protests, shoving his dry-heaving teammate off of him, elbowing both Haku and Naruto in the process.

Haku simply grunts, elbowing Sasuke in return and scrambling to his feet, far faster than the others. He sends them a smirk as they attempt to follow his lead.

"This is training," Haku says, and he whirls, needles sprouting from his sleeves like ball bearings from a pachinko machine.

"Three hundred and sixty one paths!" he challenges, and Sakura's eyes alight as she understands, crouching next to her team.

"Tenketsu," she whispers.

"Hot Stuff!" Sasuke roars, and admittedly, it's not the best he could have done. His fingers form seals, and he sucks in a breath, preparing a grand fireball.

As the clearing glows orange and red and needles tear through the air, followed by nonsensical shouts and rampaging ambushes, Zabuza feels a sense of something uncertain in his gut.

It's nostalgic, watching all of this, but there is a sense of unease. She's riding her victories, and they might all be safe for now, but it feels like there is something off. All her secrets are unravelling, and they are getting closer and closer to something she's buried for as long as she has been alive.

Zabuza will stand by her. He will, but he knows that as happy as she is, as much as she laughs and sings right now, when they turn in for the night, she will be pensive and taciturn. He watches her and tries to help, to read the files and understand the trade, but she hides the reports from them. Her handmaiden tells him that she slips away at night because she cannot sleep, and he doesn't know how to heal her. Of course, that was never his job.

No, it was their commander's.

Kisame stands before the true leader of the Akatsuki, towering over him. While he knows objectively that the man is not to blame for the mishap in River Country, he cannot help but feel a seed of quiet resentment in his heart. If the man had just kept to his word and sent Kisame, she could have been in Ame by now. Instead, she wound up

in a hospital surrounded by Leaf nin, near death's door because of the failure of the Undead Duo.

They have been punished, that's for sure, and it will take many more flawless missions from them to gain back even an ounce of his respect. Hidan may not ever get it back, not with the sneers and smug smiles he keeps sending Kisame. No matter how many times he has shredded him, or drained him dry of chakra, he still wears that infuriating little smirk of his.

" Sweet little monster like her, she takes a piece of you and she fucking swallows it, doesn't she? " the priest had said, right before Kisame crushed his throat like a straw and hurled his body away from him.

While Kakuzu seemed to repent and was content to earn his way back in the group's good graces, the younger one was disturbingly fixated. He prayed even more than usual, obsessively chanting things in that awful tongue of his. His rooms reeked of blood and innards, and though he was rarely back at base, Kisame had overheard him reciting verses that made him grit his teeth and want to ruin whole towns.

" Thus they formed, and their name was calamity. Theirs was knowledge of both good and evil; their path one of destruction... "

No matter what Itachi said, Kisame knew when he was being goaded. That Yugakure punk thought some sort of theological nonsense, and he was wrong. The divine didn't make rash, stupid decisions, and they weren't wounded to the point of a coma. The divine didn't come from places like Kiri, or make friends with blue boys with sharp teeth.

No. Ryuishi did.

"She's awake," Madara tells him, and Kisame snaps back to reality. He registers the words and he doesn't sigh in relief, but a weight

does drop from his shoulders. A thick cord of tension in his gut uncoils.

"... But there are complications," he continues.

From the ceiling, two synchronized voices laugh at once. The sound of a dry chuckle and a deep rasp mingle together. Kisame doesn't even have to look up to know that it is Zetsu, who is most likely halfway out of the ceiling, sprouting like some awful mold.

The tension in his gut returns.

"Extrapolate," Itachi says to Madara. The younger man stands firm by Kisame's side, apathetic but attentive.

"Forty-two days ago, our retrieval team failed to secure Watanabe Ryuishi. However, they did manage to make an opening that allowed Zetsu to plant his spores on her. Though a large amount died due to her unusual chakra, some took. Since then, we have been monitoring her status remotely. Ten days ago she awoke, but she remained in an unstable condition," the leader shares. "Eight days ago, Zetsu sensed a familiar chakra signature near her, but the idea seemed so ridiculous, he had to make sure."

Kisame idly flexes his hands. If it was a chakra signature that was known, but seemed that implausible, it can't be a good thing. Was there another assassination attempt he didn't catch in the works?

"She has such a tragic story," White Zetsu coos above him. "A real tearjerker. You know her teacher cut her throat?"

Kisame doesn't react, save to ball his hands into fist. He wasn't even aware she had acquired a teacher, let alone that they had mangled her. Who-?

" Orochimaru always was creepy," Black Zetsu says. " To think he had his claws around her before she even left her village. Explains a lot. "

Kisame feels like the air has been knocked from his lungs, and he cannot breathe. He feels like he is drowning on dry land, an ocean of fury and shock coursing through him.

He knows the Sannin, the traitor of his village and the Akatsuki. The silver-tongued snake with unnaturally pale skin and slitted eyes, who used to have a laboratory right by Sasori's. He was twisted and vile, and Kisame once witnessed him flay a person alive, turning them inside out in order to extract information.

Before she even left the village... how many years was she in his clutches? How many years did she suffer in silence? Why? Why did she never even tell them? Not about how she was selected for the academy, not how she survived Zabuza's rampage, not anything at all. They could have, he could have... !

"Watanabe Ryuishi is not only the Rakki Ryuu, but it seems she has insulated herself among legitimate sectors as well. Otogakure is the creation of Orochimaru, and presumably to a lesser extent, her. She has been spotted having favorable ties to any number of institutions and governments," Madara informs him. The information sinks in like a dead weight, and he feels conflicted. On one hand, his theory has been blown out of the water. She isn't functionally insane. She isn't still the girl he saw on the lake those years ago. She's a leader with power, and she's trapped. Orochimaru made her a cage, and though she has built it up like a gilded tower, a prison is a prison.

"She spilled her guts to those little leaves she adopted, you know? A whole tearoom full of people. Said that at the end she couldn't tell the difference between reality and hallucination, and that worm fixed her," White Zetsu drops casually, and Kisame... he knew. He knew somewhere inside of him she wasn't alright, and that she was broken. He saw her switch through her masks like an actor, filling each role she had. But that was years ago, and he convinced himself that he had no way of knowing what Kiri had done to her. What Orochimaru had done to her.

He still feels like the world's biggest letdown.

" At least even she admits he's a bastard," the black half chimes in.

There is silence that fills the room, and he feels like it is stifling. He's suffocating on the weight of the information he has just learned, and the tangible guilt he feels.

"Does this change the mission parameters?" Itachi asks coolly, and Kisame somehow remembers how to breathe. The air stings his nose, and for a second, he swears he can smell saltwater and flowers. That in the distance, maybe he can hear her apologizing while the crackling flames burn down their village.

She'll be safe, he thinks. If he gets them to Ame, no one can touch them. He's spent years building a haven for them, and if he can just get them here, then it will be alright. Nothing can crush the Akatsuki, they're too strong for that. Not even the Sannin can take them down.

"No, any strikes against Konoha and Otogakure can be considered beneficial to us. It will be especially be beneficial if you can get the complete unit, as he seems to have been reinstated-most likely machinations on her part to secure his safety. If the world outside our borders falls to chaos, our aims become easier to achieve. It should be said that the Sannin have gathered in Konoha, and many have a vested interest in securing her," their leader says.

Itachi narrows his eyes. "You want a stealth retrieval," he says blandly.

The leader nods.

His lone eye slides to Kisame as he says, "As quietly as possible. I would take this mission myself, but it is not me who was promised a reunion."

The swordsman stares back, and Obito wonders if he has ever seen one person so determined before. He looks like he would calmly tear

all of Konoha apart to reach his unit, and Obito distantly thinks that it is satisfying to see.

If he can tear down the Hatake bastard by stealing her right in front of him, secure a jinchuuriki or two by holding her as bait, not to mention satisfy an old deal and secure a powerful piece while getting paid to do it, well, that's all the better then, isn't it?

"Consider it done," Kisame answers. Finally, things are starting to go the way they should.

AN: Casual Reminder Kisame and Itachi both thought that the dude they were working for was Madara. Also, fun parallels between Sarutobi and Ryuishi. Gosh dang, it does seem like she dislikes him too. It's almost like looking at a reflection and being super uncomfortable with that. I mean, the plot picks up here pretty soon and we shift around from one arc into another in a few chapters. Kinda rushing here, so, uh, UHM.

Apologies for the lateness, so let me shout out to my lurkers, favoriters, and followers! To my reviewers, you make solid points and keep me so very strong!

To my beta Enbi! TREAT YO SELF. TAKE A DAY OFF. GET SOME ICECREAM.

Question: Jiraiya is even more curious! Whatever will he do next? OR How did 'everything is a weapon' go with team seven and team Kiri? What was the weirdest weapon they made?

In Which the Favor is Returned

I do not own Naruto.

Funnily enough, Jiraiya finds an opening to interrogate her when he least expects it.

It's the first night of the Chuunin exams, and after all the politicking is done and the soirées are attended to, Jiraiya find himself with free time. Things should become easier now that the test has officially begun, his sensei less worn-looking and the demands a little less heavy.

He's been waiting to catch her alone, away from the ever-watchful eyes of his ex-teammates or her escort team, but it seems that it's not an easy thing to do. All the returning ANBU patrols said the same thing; she was never alone during the day.

Mornings she spent being woken by her handmaiden, who took her to the baths and helped her get ready. Then she attended breakfast with the Mist delegation, who remained by her side the rest of the day. Sometime during the morning, her escort team arrived, and she took a stroll in the gardens, discussing things over, imparting lessons onto the young ones while discussing policy with her peers. Around noon, she usually met with Tsunade, who had completed the last of her healing sessions yesterday, and so today that time was spent preparing for future trade negotiation meetings with Orochimaru. Together, the two of them had disappeared with the Oto genin team for a while, and when they returned, the contestants had looked determined before setting out for the exams.

Evenings were spent, again, in the company of the Kiri delegation and her escort party while training, or she slipped away and accompanied the Otokage to an event. At night, the group split up

into their separate accommodations, and ANBU reported that though they often witnessed her bedding down, she didn't remain there.

It's funny, how aware she seems to be of all the eyes watching her and all the people around her. He's spotted her in the distance, parading around in her elegant robes with her carefully chosen entourage. She looks calm and collected, the vision of a sultry, elegant woman with no quarrels or problems in her life.

However, Jiraiya remembers how she spoke during the meeting between Otogakure and Konoha, when emotions ran high for everybody else in that room. She had viewed them all through shuttered, tired eyes. She had spoken with sterile rhetoric and distant apathy, and there was something empty in that dark gaze, something hollow and hungry.

It didn't fit what they knew about her, or the image she presented. This was her triumphant victory, a crowning glory where she was able to crow to the world what she had achieved. With Orochimaru as an example through her life and her Kiri upbringing, she should be smug, lording her hard-won power over others.

Yet while she cavorts and courts those around her, it seems like she is struggling with something he can't quite put his finger on, like there is a piece she is missing. She has the air of someone who is so, so close to having what she wants, and is at the same time impossibly far away from her goal. There is no venom in her voice when she brings up Konoha's shortcomings, no bitter bile over their treatment of her in the past. There is no manic glee when she is out, no haughtiness or pretentious behavior.

He doesn't like it, not one bit. He can't get a good read on her at all, and he absolutely needs to know what her goals are in this, what she aims to do. More than anybody else, she has embroiled herself within politics and schemes, tangling herself up in secrets like a Suna mummy in bandages. On a whim she could cause a war, and a secret from her lips could sink a nation. She has too many ties to remain unknown.

Still, when all is said and done, he's expecting to see far more of Orochimaru in her than he does now. A distant disdain for emotions or bonds maybe, or an overwhelming curiosity for how things function right down to a basic level. Perhaps a callous, careless disregard for morals and human life, or a sterile understanding that is scathing in nature, if technically true.

So count him surprised when he places himself on the roster for her watch team, hoping to discover whatever scheme she has been up to in the night, and finds that she hasn't been sneaking out for a double or triple cross on anyone, or any other kind of betrayal. Rather, she seems to be slipping out in the dark of night to do nothing more than swim.

It's something straight from one of his novels, really. A young woman with cunning and power, slipping through the night in an outfit consisting of ridiculously small shorts and a loose shirt, dodging through gaps in patrols and sneaking her way out of the heavily observed compound to do nothing more than disrobe and swim.

He didn't expect to be doing research tonight, but here he is. It's like the world handed him this opportunity on a silver platter and he's not going to pass it up. Not when it is such a perfect setting and scene.

The moon is bright above her, and the water is a placid mirror, reflecting the night sky above them. He understands how she earned the moniker Ningyo now, because she looks like something out of a folktale, her lithe body cutting through the stars in the water, her long hair trailing like ink and smoke behind her.

There seems to be a tranquility here, watching her glide through the pool she has found, diving and twisting in the liquid. Suspended in the calm water, she looks like she belongs there, and even though her movements on land are sure and steady, her actions in water... they're elegant.

He's seen a lot of Kiri nin in his day, and he's faced more than his fair share of opponents who specialised in aquatic combat, but she

seems more natural in the water than even those. There is an affinity at work here that goes beyond training and drills, and it seems to come from her very core. She belongs in the water, and it is her home.

She's not the prettiest thing, but she is in no way off-putting. He's actually incredibly disappointed in the Hatake boy. By all reports she had been staging impromptu sleepovers with the young man since they were both teenagers, and he never once attempted to taste the goods. Why, if Jiraiya had been in his place...

Then again, she and her old teammate seemed awfully close as well, and that was disregarding the rumors that her taste ran a little closer to her own gender.

Jiraiya stares down at his notepad, furiously scratching down ideas. Honestly, this is just too good. He can already see the next novel in his series: Icha Icha Entanglement. A story of love and enemy ninja, complete with political intrigue, mysterious pasts, expansive tastes, and tons and tons of graphic... relationships.

He giggles in anticipation, and immediately realizes it for the mistake that it is. The sound of his joy is quiet, as always, and muffled by the foliage and humidity, but there is no way to mask it once it passes his lips.

She immediately submerges, and she flares out her chakra in warning. He hadn't even realized exactly how much she had been suppressing it until now, because when she lets it go, it floods the area like a thick, viscous mess. It's cloying and unnatural, and every one of his senses tells him there is something terribly wrong with it.

For a moment he grimaces, knowing that a flare like that won't go unnoticed, especially with such a distinctive signature. He'd deal with that as well, but her chakra demands his immediate attention. Years of training with the toads tell him that there is something fundamentally unacceptable in her energy, and he tries to block it out. It's easy to ignore and pretend like it doesn't exist, but deep in

his gut, he knows it is there-a hollow, unsettling void. It's like a gaping maw, a hole where there should be none, and no matter how much his mind soothes him, no matter how sure he is in his ability to defeat her, his instincts tell him that *he should not be here* .

Something approaches him from behind and he lurches away from it, leaping from the treetops to the structure jutting out of the water's surface. The boulders are slick with moss and greenery, but it means nothing to a shinobi of his caliber, and even his geta do not inhibit him.

Above, where he once sat, he makes out the dripping image of a woman in the foliage, her eyes cold and black, unashamed of her nudity. The trees offer sparse coverage, and for a moment the tension ratchets up before she smirks, of all things.

Jiraiya raises his brow in question.

"I'll admit, I shouldn't be surprised, but I am," a husky voice intones behind him, and the figure on the branch bursts into water. The remnants of the Water Clone shower down harmlessly, and he grimaces as the brisk liquid soaks his clothes. He didn't necessarily want or need a cold shower, but he receives one nonetheless.

"Well played," he grumbles, flicking a group droplets off of the end of his hand and turning around.

The woman casually rests on the side of the boulder, her arms folded for her chin to rest on and her chest hidden against the smooth stone. From the stomach down she remains submerged, and the thought would be tantalizing to him, but there is something poisonous about her that he doesn't trust. The way her long hair pools out around her combined with the calculating, knowing look she sends him reminds him all too much of Orochimaru.

"You should leave," she advises calmly, and he sends a grin at her, seating himself pointedly on the stone. She's far too controlled to frown, or even express any tells, but something weary and dead

seems to make a home in her eyes. Already, she has concealed her chakra again, but enough lingers as a reminder of how unnatural she is.

"Why would I leave when the view tonight is so good?" he says cheerily, and he expects some sort of reaction. Indignation or righteous fury, perhaps a demure blush or an angry screech.

"If you want to play games, go away and schedule an appointment when the sun is up," she returns tonelessly.

He makes a show of letting out a considering hum, propping his chin up on his hand and closing his eyes as if deep in thought. After a second, he attempts to blow a strand of wet hair out of his face and fails. It slaps back down on his cheek and clings there.

"It's no good," he finally sighs. "Then you'll be dressed up in all those robes and surrounded by people... I like it better now, when there's nothing and no one in between us."

"You know, people always say that Orochimaru is the most despicable of the Sannin, but I find that you fit that title far better than him, being a responsibility-dodging, disrespectful, self-serving, deluded, skeevy old man," she states, without any heat at all. Almost like she's bored of this conversation already.

The only reason he doesn't flinch is because his eyes are already closed. That's quite the condemnation, coming from her.

"I can understand some of those, but self-serving and deluded? That's pretty harsh," he protests easily, opening his eyes and pinning her with a look. "Especially coming from a manipulative, scheming, disloyal, power-hungry, amoral little murderess."

She doesn't flinch, or even grimace at all, but nor does she appear to ignore him. Instead she allows the words to sink in, before accepting the insults with a shrug. "What else do you call a man who abandons everything and cavorts around-while his country and teammates

struggle and his *godson* grows up neglected and uncared for-other than self-serving?"

This time Jiraiya does flinch, because *she shouldn't know that*. There is no way she should have known that he was a godfather, but seeing that word come from her lips, he can only assume that she even knows who the child is.

She's dangerous, he knew that, but to hear those words, to catch a glimpse of how deep some of her knowledge goes, it worries him greatly. All this time, he was wondering about a group half a world away when one of the greatest threats was already inside his home.

"You're so quick to reveal something you have no right to know. I wonder how you would react if I said I know where the commander of your unit is," he whispers, deadly cold.

Finally, he receives a reaction from her. Her eyes widen with outrage, and she sucks in a breath as if he has just struck her. She bares her teeth at him, and he watches as she effortlessly morphs into the rampaging monster that was born amidst the blood and mist of Kirigakure's front lines. It's an incredibly strong reaction from such a vague clue.

"If you so much as fucking *breathe* in the direction of my unit and my family, I will tear down your kingdom, your life's work, and leave you helpless in the gutters of what once was your home," she spits, ruin dripping off her tongue. The water around her ripples in agitation, and she leaks chakra like a sieve.

For a moment he is stunned at the sheer, raw anger inside her words; the absolute fury and vehemence held within them. He revealed a truth for a truth, and she seethes at his pointed words. Threatens a kingdom he didn't have, his life's work...

Pieces click together inside his mind, and suddenly, he has what he came for. She's dangerous and deadly and unnatural, but not in the way Orochimaru is, not exactly. She's not pushing to see how far she

can go, to see what she can achieve, and she's not mindless in her attacks.

"That's a lot of emotion to display for somebody you haven't seen in years," he says softly.

" *Shut your mouth,*" she snarls, like a wild animal.

"It must have been easy at first, manipulating and scheming when you only had your own life to lose, when all you ever wanted was to be safe and happy..." he says, imagining what it must have been like, to witness the world through the eyes of a child far too smart for her own good, knowing that the system was flawed. He conjures ideas of what she must have done to find a place in the ninja world when she came from a lower caste.

He gets it, the answer he came for, what she wants from this, and it makes her even more dangerous. She's not an idealist or a conqueror, she's compromised.

"Then you met your unit," he continues. "You might not have liked them at first, or maybe you thought you could just skate by until you made it on your own. However, they wormed their way in, and it was harder because you cared. Naturally, you wanted better for them, and you knew how to get it."

She snarls again and pushes off the rock, submerging herself in the water to drown out his words. He keeps going, knowing that any person who has this much skill in water can eavesdrop from below the surface. Sound carries, and she will hear him, whether she wants to or not.

"So you build a safe space for them. You have to go away to do it, but it gets done. The thing is, people keep worming their way in. You keep caring, and you know what can happen, you know what you can lose, but you can't stop yourself. You keep trying to build a safe space for them all, and it turns into a kingdom," he says, making

deductions from what he knows. The files aren't complete. Hell, he's not sure they will ever be complete, not with her, but there is enough.

"A kingdom that started for the sake of two kings, but grew to encompass so many more. A place where you were in control, and nobody could stand against you and yours, where the things that happened in Kirigakure could never happen again because you wouldn't let them. But one founding king never came back, and you don't know what to do in a safe place," he says, guessing off of psyche evaluations and what he has seen. The way she walks with the brood she has collected around her, the way she is aware of every member of her little group, her eyes darting around, anticipating and ready to fight. It makes sense now, why she seems so tired and defeated even though she has the upper hand and appears to have won.

All she knows is the fight. All she knows is scheming and planning against forces greater than herself. She's lost and exhausted but doesn't know how to trust somebody else to help her, because she needs that control. Letting someone help her is letting someone else take just a little bit away. She's obsessive in her need to manipulate and lie, because scheming is how she stops things from being taken from her. She couldn't be a powerhouse on the battlefield, couldn't stop her squad from dying, so she became a force that could avoid wars in the first place.

"You're not disloyal," Jiraiya concludes, quietly. "But you don't know what to do with good things. You know that you're a poison to them, and that their safe place doesn't include you."

His last words are a shot below the belt, a final conclusion that he knows will hurt to hear.

"You love them."

In a twisted, needy, messed-up way that is toxic and makes him cringe, but she came from Kiri, so he can't exactly say he's surprised.

"At least I never abandoned them," she hisses, words scathing like acid and razor blades, and he can't see her, but he knows she's somewhere to his right. "At least I never abandoned the child I was supposed to protect, let him be found by a criminal, or let the student I taught die. At least I have part of my unit, and at least I'm not chasing after a woman who's in love with a dead man."

Jiraiya feels each one of her words like a stab to the heart, and they knock the air from his lungs. He can't say he regrets saying those things to her, but she certainly made him pay for it. She sharpened those words and crammed them into the places they would hurt the most.

"Hah," he breathes out, feeling moisture gather in the corner of his eyes against his will. She knows, far, far too much. "Well, I guess--"

"LEAVE!" she cries out, and her voice is loud, drowning out his entirely. She silently congratulates herself for not letting her voice break, because Nox knows she started crying at some point. Her back presses against the rock, and she shivers, suddenly far too cold and tired.

Is she fatalistic, believing that none of it matters at all and her actions are all predetermined? Is she an existentialist, believing that she has free will, and that her choices have consequences?

None and both. She is selfish, and she wants what she wants, while being apologetically unapologetic about it. In the end, all human interaction can be loosely defined as manipulation.

It's a lot to do about nothing, and absolutely everything to her.

The bare facts are that an perverted old man made her cry, and it felt good to return the favor. She's naked, soaking, tired, cold, and she... doesn't know. She's got a chest full of feels, so fuck this guy. Seriously, Gaara walked away from her and she didn't cry. She almost died and she only cried a little. This douche rolls up and here she is, her eyeballs acting up and her heart hurting.

"Go away," she whispers instead, wiping her nose with the back of her hand. It's snotty and gross, so she washes it clean in the river water, submerging her head and swiping furiously at her face to get rid of any traces of tears. Fuck emotions.

The two of them are so stuck in their perspective hurts that they never notice the approaching chakra signatures. Or, rather, Jiraiya doesn't. Ryuishi wouldn't be able to even if she wasn't crying and underwater.

Which is probably why she's terribly confused when she hears splashing, muffled and in a deeper tone, carrying through the water. It makes her pause, immediately on guard.

She goes to surface, her eyes stinging and her emotions all over the place, a deeply ingrained paranoia telling her to check her surroundings. She breaks through the top of the water, squinting to see around the boulder.

A livid Zabuza stands on the rock where the sannin was seated, dressed in pajama pants and carrying Kubikiribocho menacingly, his face wrapped hastily. He stares down at the splashing man with rage while Kakashi and someone who is probably a masked Tenzō crouch in the tree branches behind him.

"You just assaulted one of the Sannin," Kakashi informs Zabuza drolly, and she wonders if she can quietly slip back under without being noticed.

"You felt the flare, and her chakra is all over this place," Zabuza snaps back, his eyes scanning the water. Years of experience allow him to spot her well-camouflaged form peeking around the massive rock. His eyes lock with hers, and something in his form eases.

"You're supposed to be sleeping," he scolds her, and she sinks down some more, contemplating her escape.

"Don't you dare dive," he orders, lowering his strike stance and channeling chakra to his feet. He angrily makes his way over the water's surface while Jiraiya emerges from the depths, sputtering for breath.

"What the hell-!" Jiraiya's voice says.

"Zabuza, wait-" she attempts, but he bends down and snatches her wrist in a vice grip before turning around and dragging her through the liquid, his footsteps forceful and irritated.

She writhes for a second, attempting to pull free without hurting him, but he only clamps down harder, pulling her to shore. He reaches the shallows and she barely gets her legs underneath her in time to stumble after him.

"Are you naked?!" Kakashi asks with alarm.

"I'm not surprised," Tenzō remarks, and yes, that is definitely Wood Boy. That is his 'Watanabe is doing weird things, whatever' voice.

Zabuza whirls on her, his eyes blazing. She meets his gaze sheepishly, still trying to tug her wrist out of his grasp.

" *Why?* " he says.

"I wanted to go swimming," she mumbles, blinking rapidly.

He leans in, getting a closer look at her face, and she can feel the moment he notices it. A hot wash of shame coils in her gut, and she wishes she could just slink back into the water and swim away. Movement in her peripherals draws her attention, and she's certain that the ANBU are no longer in the trees.

"You were crying," he accuses, staring at her red, puffy eyes.

She doesn't even question what sort of owl vision he must have, immediately denying the statement.

"No," she says mulishly, snapping her attention back to his face.

There is sloshing sounds, and they immediately draw Zabuza's attention. She pulls her wrist free from his grip the moment he is distracted, taking steps back toward the river, but very carefully placed hands on her shoulders tell her that her path has been blocked.

"Why are you naked?" Kakashi sounds utterly mystified, and she just... she just-

"Why is everybody else clothed?" she snaps, losing patience and choking back even more frustrated tears.

"There are way too many men here for this conversation to be headed towards a good place," says Jiraiya. He looks like a drowned rat, his red outfit waterlogged and his hair flat. The moonlight does him no favours, casting dramatic shadows on his form, making him look ragged and worn.

Zabuza stares him down in that particular way he has, like murder and apathy all rolled up into one glance, and she feels something being draped over her shoulders. A heavy, thick cloak that smells of tree sap is placed on her, and she shivers. It's still warm from Wood Boy's ambient body heat, and she clutches at it, covering herself up. It's not because she's found her missing sense of modesty, but because it makes her feel secure, and she can hide her vulnerability in its folds.

Just leave me alone, she thinks. It's not worth it. I'm tired and I want to sleep forever.

"What did you do?" Zabuza asks Jiraiya sharply, and the man turns to him with a bewildered look.

"What did I do?" he says indignantly.

Tenzo quietly places his hands on her shoulders, and he slowly begins to shift her away from the old pervert. He is steady at her back, and she is quietly thankful for him as he guides her towards the shadows ever so slowly. It's like he knows that is where she feels the safest outside water, where she feels the most calm.

"Jiraiya-sama, Ryuishi is a guest of Konoha under the Oto delegation. Please respect her privacy. Though your peeping may be harmless, her reputation could be at stake," she hears Kakashi inform the man.

"Her *reputation*? " Jiraiya cries. "As what? A missing-nin, or a cutthroat minx in league with Orochimaru?"

Ryuishi blocks the rest of it out. She doesn't notice the sudden rise in tension, or the calm, aloof glances that Kakashi and Zabuza seem to adorn at his words. The only thing she acknowledges is her own weariness, and the steady hands on her shoulders guiding her back towards her quarters. Jiraiya's words ring in her ears.

You don't know what to do with good things. You're toxic.

She is so tired.

Senju Tsunade has been through her fair share of trials in her day. She is not someone easily cowed by displays of power, or a woman who is overwhelmed when the odds are stacked against her. She has survived war, heartbreak, and loss. She is the last of her clan, and she has not only lived up to her heritage, but surpassed it, becoming the finest medic of all time, and the strongest kunoichi Konoha has ever produced.

With a flick of her wrist she can crumble cliffsides, and her seal has stopped time in its tracks, suspending her forever in youth. She can stop an opponent's heart with a tap of her fingers, and bring those near death's door back to full health with her bare hands.

She has experience, intelligence, and wisdom. She has skill and dedication, and she knows her teammates more than anybody else alive.

"I know what you're scheming, Orochimaru," Tsunade states boldly, sitting across from him. When she was younger, she used to envy his sharp golden eyes and porcelain skin, and in a way, she still does. He is older than she is, and yet he has found a way of his own to stop the deterioration of his body. He looks as he did twenty years ago, all lean muscle and coiled strength hidden in slender limbs and angular cheekbones.

He grins at her, and it is a wicked thing. She has always been unsettled by that particular smile, the one that says she may know, but she doesn't quite yet understand.

"Oh? Have you figured it already?" he rasps, and she narrows her amber eyes at him. He's always been like this, treating life like some sort of game. Maybe it's his coping method, or just the way he views things. Ever since he was a child he tried to find the rules, tried to bend them and make them suit his whims. He poked and he prodded with no mind to morality or value. The world simply existed to entertain him, to provide amusement by being the greatest puzzle that ever was.

"It might work," she admits, because he's clever and he's backed them all into a corner. He's plotted and he's schemed, and he may have won this round. "... To an extent."

Those slitted pupils land on her, and the way he watches her is eerie and comforting at the same time. It pulls up memories of campfires and wood smoke, the sound of rain outside caves, and a time when all she cherished was still alive to be cherished. It also pulls up memories of his own co-founders medical history.

Tsunade knows her teammates, and she knows their handiwork. Orochimaru's sterile scrawl is written out on the Kiri girl's body like a brand, from the clean line dissecting her throat, to the disfigured

ligaments and worn sockets of her joints. He was not kind to her when he trained her strength, nor was he merciful when he poked at her foreign chakra.

Her network is a mess. It is the barest skeleton of a working system. There are blanks and hollows in spots where living energy should flow, and her gates make Tsunade shiver thinking about them, infected with that potent miasma that made her fingertips go numb and seemed to hungrily devour the medical chakra. Healing around the hollow points had been tricky, especially with how prevalent they seemed to be.

"Tell me what it is you are wondering, Tsunade," he prompts with that grin, dry amusement leaking from his voice. "What grand scheme have I set in motion?"

She frowns at him, because she doesn't want to be sucked into his game. She isn't playing, no matter what he believes, and if she gets involved, it won't be how he imagines it.

"Sensei can't remain the Hokage much longer, not with Oto knowing as much as it does about his actions. He should have retired a long time ago, if we're honest."

The smug bastard seated across from her has the audacity to prop his chin in his palm boredly, his expression set. He doesn't even speak as he leans forward, his hands curled around his peppermint tea. He just gestures fluidly with his hand, telling her to move on.

"You revenge for sensei is airing his deeds and letting him live the rest of his life in shame and dishonor. You revenge on your team is having one of us take his place, because no one else can be trusted," she says acidly, and she can taste bitterness on the back of her tongue.

"There is always The Elder Council Members," Orochimaru reminds her.

She clicks her tongue with disgust and scowls at her own cup of sake. Tsunade has a bone to pick with Danzō after the Chuunin Exams, whether or not things go as planned for Orochimaru. And as for sensei's old teammates, well... it's time that a new generation takes the stage, because the old is being hopelessly outmaneuvered, and if it continues, the Land of Fire might as well be annexed and renamed the New Land of Rice. Forty percent of their food supply comes from Rice, not to mention the raw resources in general. Most of their merchants follow the advice of The Rakki Ryuu, who has led them to double and triple profit over the years, and Fire uses River as a trading hub for everything to the North, West, and South.

"You would tear them apart with your eyes closed, not to mention I don't trust them for a second. No, you considered the candidates. I bet you went so far as to look into the next generation after us and considered not only the Nara clan head, but the Hatake boy for candidacy as well. The Nara would be easily swayed by logic but Shikaku lacks the motivation to take the lead, and he has a glaring weakness in the form of his family and clan. The Hatake brat, well, you had her take care of that problem. He's already amenable to dealing with Oto should she represent it," Tsunade says.

His golden eyes glitter like a frozen sun, bright and burning, but devoid of any heat. "Well figured, Hime, but whyever would you or Jiraiya take the position?"

She briefly considers punching him through the wall, but she realizes that the slippery bastard would not only expect that, but he would laugh at the reaction. He would see it as sentimental, and he would be vindictive and merciless in his response.

He knows damn well why she or Jiraiya would take the hat. After discovering exactly what has transpired in their absence, how far it has sunk... They have an obligation to clean up the mess it has become. Not only that, but she and Jiraiya are the only ones who can be trusted to deal with the threat that Orochimaru poses as the Otokage. The three of them were taught together, trained together,

went to war together. They know each other, can anticipate each other's moves and motivations. No other person in the world would be better suited to take the mantle left behind than the remnants of the Sannin.

It was Dan's dream, and Nawaki's. The two of them died for the sake of this country, and she will be damned if she watches the home they fought for be handed over to a moron or moralesless leech. Their sacrifices cannot be in vain. She won't let them be.

She knows damn well Jiraiya feels the same, because his students died for this place. Though he may have left Minato's child in the hands of their sensei and thrown away his responsibilities to their legacy, he knows that he can't continue doing so. Not when the boy has already been coddled at the breast of an enemy. They are damn lucky Orochimaru didn't see fit to interact with the jinchuuriki directly, or Konoha might as well have held the sword to their own neck.

But the crux of the matter remains: one of them will take their teacher's place after the Chuunin Exams. The only question that remains is who, and how Orochimaru will react when he realizes that they won't play nice because of a shared past.

"Cut the crap, Orochimaru, you know why. It's not going to work out for you in the long run," Tsunade growls angrily, and the man frowns at her. This is the part he always hated, the part where he missed something and it worked against him, where his cool cunning and sterile intelligence became a weakness, not a strength.

"Did you ever stop to think that taking in an unstable child and molding her into an unstoppable force might be a bad idea?" Tsunade asks. "That allowing her to excel in certain areas while completely ignoring others was a bad idea?"

He sneers at her then, seeing the conclusion she is leading up to. Ryuishi is his, and she is an excellent example of what he can do. She is clever and capable, and though she might be weak to some on the battlefield, she completely overpowers everyone with her

skillful manipulations. She's his conduit to the people, and she works them like a master weaves on a loom, tangling trade and castes and politics together to create something never before seen. She owes him her life, and she knows how prosperous their partnership is. Tsunade is deluded if she thinks she is stupid enough to betray him.

"You never seemed to understand people on a level others might, so let me tell you something you missed," she informs him. "She's feral, right down to her bones. She might walk the walk and talk the talk, but I'll eat my own shoes if she didn't become a kunoichi with the intent to use it to her own gain. The wild is going to take her back one day, you mark my words."

Orochimaru hisses dismissively at her, throwing her warning into the wind.

"Perhaps you should have become the writer. Such imaginative ramblings would certainly not be out of place in Jiraiya's rags. Spare me your ill-fitting similes," he rasps, taking a sip of his tea. He grimaces when the now-lukewarm liquid hits his tongue. He waited too long, and it has lost its heat.

Tsunade frowns at him, but she lets him have his victory for now. If he won't listen, then on his own head be it, but Tsunade knows that the woman gallivanting around in finery and playing the part of politician and diplomat is a farce. She won't let her in anymore than she has already advanced, because loyal she may be, but stable she is not. Watanabe Ryuishi will already take down far too much when she falls, and Konoha will not crumple with her.

Tsunade won't let it.

Shimura Danzō knows what he has known all along: the Rakki Ryuu should be dead.

He warned Sarutobi when it all began, that the rising rumors to the east were dangerous. He knew that nothing but trouble came from

the Land of Water. They were a people that never forgot what ninja were supposed to be, that in the end, it was kill or be killed. Anything from that country was bad news for the Land of Fire, and any shinobi that made it through the ranks was hard and ruthless.

On his own, Orochimaru would have been trouble enough. The scientist was cold and calculating, one of the best to ever spring from Konoha's ranks. He was aware of what keeping power and peace truly cost. It was his genius that allowed Danzō to reclaim his arm with the use of the First Hokage's DNA, and it was he who knew the power of the Uchiha. Had he been truly loyal, Danzō has no doubts that he would have made Konoha into something great.

His silent acceptance of orders and his willingness to take the fall allowed Danzō to continue his work for the good of Konoha. Of course, over the years the two had mutually beneficial dealings, and Danzō knows that it could have continued like this for as long as they both lived. They were reasonable men who pursued progress, and as long as the man's ambition did not overtake him, they could have both prospered.

The Rakki Ryuu ruined all of that.

She paraded around and whispered temptations and lies into Orochimaru's once reasonable ears. She molded him a pipe dream of glory and greatness, one where he could have the admiration of the people and the power he so desired. Like a demon, she seduced people and nations to her side with profit and goods, turning citizens sour against their homes.

The monster wormed her way into a place of control so slow even he had a hard time catching on. She hid under the guise of subservience, pretending to be the pawn of Konoha while playing the part of loyal servant to Orochimaru. She acted as if she was under their rule while she usurped them from below.

Danzō will not allow her to continue any longer.

He is aware of the consequences of his actions. He knows very well that her demise will lead to war, but he is a shinobi. He knows war. Konoha knows war. It has survived it before and it will survive it again, but it will not survive the disease that is her. She is a slow rot, advancing with patience and time, withering the prosperous state that the Elemental Nations once had.

Without her to lead, the trade empire will crumble, and an information network will be ripe for the taking. A power vacuum will rise, and Konoha will have a chance to seize what is left when she is no longer in the picture. For a little while chaos will reign, but in the end, the Land of Fire will be far better off with her gone.

Without the tangible temptation there, Orochimaru will regain his sense. He will most likely lose the power that makes him such an incredible threat, and the setbacks of the chaos will buy Danzō time to gather what he needs to face the wayward brat. He always knew his dealings with the man held an edge of danger, but it seems to him that he needs to be reminded that he was doing the same. Ruining his reputation and exiling him didn't seem to work, but removing his beloved little demon should do it.

It's a shame that he didn't quite have enough time to build up his own forces. When Sarutobi told him to disband, he was forced to appear like he followed orders. In time, just a few short years, he could have been an actual threat to her. He has numbers inside the ANBU ranks, and plants all over, but he doesn't quite have them where he needs them. The teams on escort duty are being screened, and none of his agents have made it through. It would have been a simple matter to dispose of her if they had.

For now, he is forced to rely on outside resources to get the job done.

Usually, he wouldn't trust somebody from outside Konoha to complete a job of this magnitude. However, the Rakki Ryuu has made enemies, and Konoha cannot be implicated in this act. Their forces must be seen as neutral, honoring the wishes of their daimyo.

Only those unseen in the shadows may move, and then, they can only go so far.

It is well known that the Grass daimyo has a grudge against the Rakki Ryuu, and no way to fulfill it. Powerless and trapped, he only has the memory of greatness to satisfy him-the rest is stripped away. He's willing to throw what money he has to see her gone, and he will make a wonderful scapegoat.

After that, the remaining older generation of Kiri may be implicated. Any one of them could have hired an outside source, bitter over the way she shamed them and crashed their ideals to the ground.

And there will always, always be power-hungry citizens with far too much money and sway. They have grown fat and content with the changes she has made, but any one of them could have looked upon her influence with jealous eyes.

No one will think to look underneath the underneath, to see the roots that rest below the tree, and the way they reached out to the organization of hunters that came perilously close to killing her before. Had her guards been removed, Danzō has no doubt that they would have succeeded.

All he needs to do is give them an opening, and the late night trips she takes without her guard seems like his best chance to do so.

AN: HEYO. So, remember when Ryuishi spilled some truth tea? Well, it was time for some others to spill some of hers. Jiraiya has a solid point when he says Ryuishi's is controlling and toxic, and Tsunade is also correct when she says that fundamentally speaking, Ryuishi is feral. She has no clue what to do when things are going good, or how to live in peace time. She absolutely needs to scheme and attempt to control everything, and that's not okay. It's doubly not okay because Ryuishi keeps wanting things to go on a bigger scale. Wartime leaders are not great peacetime leaders, history has proven this

true. An emotionally stunted, possessive, traumatized war veteran who refuses to deal with her issues should not be attempting to solve world problems when she can't handle her own.

ALso, I guess my fic is a year old. Look at my darling. Look at how far we have come.

To my lurkers, favoriters, and followers; thank you for your awesome integrity. To my reviewers, YOU KEEP ME STRONG AND MOTIVATED HOLY SHIT I LOVE YOU GUYS.

To my beta enbi; Without you this fic would have never left it's initial, poorly planned, poorly written format. Thank you for continuously being there. Thank you for the brainstorming sessions, softly delivering the critiques I need to here, and remaining with this fic even though your life is super hella busy.

QUESTION: With Ryuishi having grabbed up a bunch of power, could Danzo have even come close to the position he once had in canon? OR What the shit have the kids been up to?

Interlude: The kids are Alright

I do not own Naruto.

Naruto isn't stupid. He knows that the adults are hiding something from them, something big.

He frowns, drumming his fingers against his arm, trying to figure out when it could have happened. He's been by nee-san's side this entire time, ever since they found her in the market with the red-headed boy and the strange, eerie Otokage. Naruto knows that Ryuu-nee said to respect him, but he also hasn't missed the way she never comes into contact with him when the team is around.

If she would just stop being so complicated and say what she means, maybe he would figure it out. He might be able to solve the problem if he was allowed in on the big meetings she goes to in the mornings, but genin "aren't authorized to handle such sensitive information" or whatever. Heck, sometimes Kakashi-sensei and Zabuza-san aren't allowed inside, but they're jounin, so they have their own secret stuff to do.

He wishes the thoughts in his brain would just make sense. He can't put them in order, and every time he tries to focus on just one, they jumble up and he gets distracted.

He scowls, pivoting on the spot and walking back toward the other end of the hall. He briefly passes Haku, who is moving in opposition to him, pacing one way while he paces the other.

So much has happened. Ryuu-nee turned out to be Rakki Ryuu-nee, who had the saddest life Naruto had ever heard. The Odayaka Oni, his childhood hero, turned out to be a weirdo with no eyebrows and a big sword. Sakura and Sasuke didn't even know the story, and he

had to tell them. They accused him of making it up, but then Haku said it was true and they believed him. Which is rude.

Ryuu-nee can apparently punch holes in trees, but also she's stupid and won't stop sneaking around and getting into trouble. He's certain Kakashi-sensei and Zabuza-san are attempting to stop her, but Naruto thinks they don't stand a chance unless they all do it together. She's *the Rakki Ryuu*. She's been running around doing crazy stuff since she was born.

"Would you two sit down? You're making me anxious just by watching you," Sakura gripes, attempting to focus on the text in her hands. If they are going to have downtime in the mornings while Watanabe-sama holds committees and conferences, then they should do what she's doing. Now is the time to learn, and though they might not like her physiology scroll, they can pick up whatever subject interests them. Or practice Kata forms like Sasuke, who keeps mumbling gibberish obsessively under his breath.

Sasuke... hasn't been taking Watanabe-sama's training sessions very well. He shouldn't take it so personally, she's obviously a genius jounin. There's no way fresh genin could keep up. Even Kakashi-sensei seems surprised half the time, and really, the fact that she sometimes beats people up with other people is respectable. Sakura would think that Sasuke would admire her creativity, because she really *did* prove anything can be a weapon. That's inspired, that's what that is.

Naruto, meanwhile, is throwing a fit, "You don't get it, Sakura! She was humming this morning, and something obviously happened-"

"-she drank extra strong tea. She only drinks extra strong brews when she's lost a lot of sleep-" Haku fills in.

"-and then there was that thing with the red-headed kid and the Otokage. The kid seems like he made her sad and Haku obviously hates this Orochimaru. In fact, nobody seems to trust him but Ryuu-nee, and that's not a good sign."

"I didn't do anything, obviously," Haku says, sounding affronted.

"Really, at this point I'm sure she needs a night and day watch team, but nobody is letting us in on these meetings. I don't know what's going on in there, but a bunch of old people went in there and a guy with crazy lavender eyes stormed out about an hour ago. Other than that though, it's been quiet because of the seals, and ugh, I just don't know," Naruto exclaims with a hmp.

Sakura turns the page of her medical text. She stopped paying attention about halfway into that mess, because she knows that crazy is contagious, and she's very careful not to catch Naruto's special brand of it.

"Yamanaka," Sasuke grunts, executing a flawless palm strike.

Sakura and Haku blink.

"What?" she asks, closing her textbook. What in the world is he saying that name for?

Naruto, on the other hand, demonstrates he is a product of Ryuishi's raising, and his blue eyes glimmer as he halts his pacing. He lets out a crow of triumph and immediately creates a crowd of clones.

"Find Ino and bring her to me!" he orders them, and they spill down the corridors in search of his fellow blond.

Sasuke looks momentarily disappointed at Naruto's easy understanding of his riddle. He has to be vaguer, more esoteric. Maybe if he had said fangirl instead of her actual name... He's going to catch that wily woman by surprise, just watch him. She'll have to do better next time, because he's not just going to let her pull him under the water this time, no way. He's on to her.

"What's happening?" Haku says, bewildered by the sudden sequence of events. The older boy has paused, his arms folded behind him calmly. Sasuke knows now that it only looks like a cordial

and inviting stance. Those long sleeves of his are filled with senbon, and he only needs one hand to perform ninjutsu. He's a skilled fighter, especially for a medic.

"You need more information," Sasuke says, performing an axe kick on empty air.

"And nobody knows more than Ino," Sakura finishes dejectedly. Her rival's gossiping and information networking is incredible, even she can admit that. Of course, it's obviously not as good as Sakura's is now, because she knows Naruto, who knows Watanabe-sama. That has to trump Ino, right?

Haku still doesn't understand. "And this Ino is...?"

"The queen of rumors," Naruto declares. "She knows more about what is going on than anybody."

"She also happens to be the heiress to the Yamanaka clan, and her father doesn't realize what an eavesdropper she is," Sasuke says.

Haku halts his pacing, and he looks at the Uchiha. The considering expression on his face is eerily similar to a predatory stare, and his eyes narrow.

"Do you three happen to have anymore friends?"

Once, long ago, Ryuishi was where he is now. She had no information, no power, and superiors who refused to work with her.

Of course, her and Zabuza's situation was much worse, but still. The theory remains that people can be drawn together for a common cause, or for their own curiosity. *If* the adults will not allow them to act and keep them segregated, then the younger generation will just have to show them how ready they are. Haku will do as she did, and begin collecting informants, networks of people.

"Sasuke is friends with Shino, who is the Aburame heir," Sakura remarks.

Haku's eyes light up hungrily. One of the noble founding clans of Konoha, and most likely a wealth of information. A child of a family like that is bound to overhear information, he should know. He holds an abundance of secrets that he shouldn't know because he lives in the same house with Ryuishi and Zabuza.

"We're associates and comrades," Sasuke corrects. He and Shino had both agreed when they were ten that putting it that way sounded better in a professional setting than the term friends. Of course, they had argued over the connotations of the word "friends" for a while before deciding that term also suited them, but the previous stated words had better implication in a business setting.

"Actually," Sakura interjects, thinking about it for a moment. "I think our Academy class was made up of tons of clan heirs. If Ino's coming, then Shikamaru and Choji will probably be joining as well. I think Shino is on a team with Kiba and Hinata as well. So that's the Yamanaka, Nara, Akimichi, Aburame, Hyuuga, and Inuzuka."

Haku briefly estimates how much longer this meeting will take. Based on the past few days, he's not exaggerating when he says it will be a few hours yet. There is time to hold a council of his own.

Oh, and what a council it will be. Clan heirs and genin, already bound by social structure and relationships. Why, if he can just get them talking then he might be able to deduce what Ryuishi has been doing in these conferences of hers, and then he can tell Zabuza, and then they all can stop her.

Haku will set up in the garden under the guise of socializing. If anybody asks, he's just the ward of two important diplomats looking to interact with his peer group, and he certainly will do his best to make it such an event. They can even discuss the Chuunin Exams. He can picture it in his head now...

Oh, did you hear, Yamanaka-san? Oto and Suna tied in the second exam. It will be a few more days until it finishes, but those two teams certainly look promising, don't they? he'll say, pouring them all a cup of refreshing white tea that pairs perfectly with the light taste of the toasted rice senbei.

You're up to date, I'll give you that, but have you heard about how the clans are in uproar over Kiri and Oto's planned engagement? They say that Konoha is heartbroken, but I think it's romantic, the faceless newcomer will sigh while admiring the gardens.

Then they'll all bond over this new tale and Haku will have a solid foundation of friends for a new network. His guardians will recognize his skill and praise him for his work. Ryuishi will finally allow him full access to her network and Zabuza will allow them to fight as a full fledged unit, not with him in the middle, but with them.

Not only that, but he'll finally be able to shove it in Sakura's face that he was right and Ryuishi and her sensei were not a couple, but Zabuza and her were. All while discovering that it was only a bad case of nerves that got her so wound up.

Or something like that, anyway. It probably won't be that scenario exactly, as much as he hopes it will happen. But whatever does occur will be better than pacing these floors and chasing his thoughts in circles. Now he just has to gather the members and create a safe and amicable environment for them to bond in.

"Naruto-kun," Haku says thoughtfully. "Would you mind sending out a few more clones?"

There is a dog on the table.

Mind you, it's not like Haku particularly cares. He's rather caught up in the pieces laid out in front of him, his focus on the Shogi board allowing him to block out other distractions around him. Still, he is

peripherally aware of several things happening, as all ninja should be. Situational awareness can save lives, after all.

Sakura and Ino, apparently, are far more than just academy friends. Haku can say he's never seen such passionate rivalry from anybody before. The instant the two locked eyes they started bickering, half caught between scathing snark and united, bubbling giggles. Right now they are tangled on the ground, caught up in trying to either tear each other's limbs off or violently cuddle. He isn't sure which it is.

Naruto and the Inuzuka boy (Kiba?) seem to be bonding over their shared love of flatuation jokes and food. The Akimichi occasionally joins in on the conversation, sharing the bowl of snacks Haku put out before this all began. It's mostly empty by now, and there are crumbs all over the ground. He's idly glad that he decided to host this in the gardens, and not inside the tea room. Cleaning crumbs out of tatami mats can be a labor-intensive chore.

The spread blanket seems to have been claimed by the noble clan children. The Hyuuga girl, Aburame boy, and Sasuke seem to have unanimously decided that they are more interested in the steaming pot of tea and distantly observing interactions than partaking in events. Occasionally, they will advise him or his opponent on a move, or make some clever comment on one they have made. Other than that, they seem content to keep the peace and occasionally get wrangled into events by the other children.

Across from him sits the most pompous, faux-relaxed genin Haku has ever had the displeasure of meeting in his life. The boy is clever, Haku will give him that, but Ryuishi always said that it was the clever ones you had to keep an eye on, and apparently rightly so.

Nara Shikamaru has much more experience playing Shogi than Haku does, and he's a clever, wily opponent, but Haku has more experience being a ninja. Surely if they were playing fair, Haku would be hard-pressed to defeat him, but they aren't. Or rather, he isn't. He's not going to play by the rules when he knows he'll lose by them,

no. He's going to strategically alter them so it plays to his skills better.

In other words, he's going to cheat.

And really, one should expect such a move when playing with ninja. The two words might as well be synonymous at this point. Sneaky is how a ninja is supposed to be, not fair.

Haku has no compunctions about moving pieces when the other boy is distracted, or by casually removing a few from the board. He makes sure to keep his actions covert and discreet, and the other boy seems to be slowly catching on but is too prideful to complain. He seems to be catching on to the real game being played.

Honestly speaking, he doesn't have much of a chance at winning in a competition of stealth with Haku. His best bet would be to turn it back into a game of intelligence by either calling Haku out, or turning his attention away from events by a wild statement of fact. Yet he does neither, carefully straining to manipulate Haku's rook by its shadow while attempting to appear as if he is just thinking. It's cute, in a way, but Haku knows his focus isn't that great.

"There is a dog on the table," Haku says calmly, as if remarking on the weather.

The statement does its intended job, and Shikamaru flicks his eyes over to the table near Naruto and sees that there is indeed a puppy on it, consuming little pieces the boys have dropped with gleeful abandon.

Haku utilizes that scant second of distraction and drums his fingers on the table, tugging a chakra thread on the tip of his index to slide a lance piece over one square, giving him the lineup for a finishing blow. Shikamaru looks back and squints at the pieces suspiciously, and his control over his jutsu breaks. The shadows recede from his rook, and Haku sees the faintest of scowls mar the boy's face.

It should make Haku feel victorious, but it doesn't. All he feels is mildly irritated, because while making connections is useful, there are no rumors to be found that seem to pertain to his caretakers. Sure, he knows that a young chuunin and an ANBU operative are having an illicit affair, and that the shop in the north district is having a closing out sale, but the clan children are suspiciously tight-lipped about internal affairs. He knows for a fact that the Hyuuga girl looks ridiculously alert and on guard, but not why.

"The jounin seem curiously on guard lately," Shikamaru says casually.

"How strange, Nara-san," Haku returns easily. "I wonder why."

The younger boy sighs, and his eyes look up from the board, seemingly abandoning the game for a loss. Haku thinks it's a bit premature of him, but he isn't about to complain.

"At first I thought it was because of the Chuunin Exams, but looking back on it, I think it actually began when the Otogakure delegation arrived," he says with false lightness, resting his elbow on his knee and propping his head up with his hand.

"Curiouser and curiouser," Haku demurs idly, moving his general forward a square, boxing in the other boy's king.

"Combined with the fact that none of the rookies have been entered in the exams, even though it would be good experience and a great way to encourage international relationships, especially with the advantage of home ground... makes a guy wonder what Oto showing up means," Shikamaru drawls.

"Perhaps your jounin realized that the minnows aren't quite ready to swim with the big fish just yet," Haku states placidly, his demeanor never faltering.

Shikamaru's eyes seem to flicker for a moment, darting around while he absorbs that little hint. His gaze strays to where Team Seven is

scattered, and then he takes a deeper look at Haku. It's quite the Water Country metaphor for a shinobi that is not obviously aligned. It gives hints to his background, but nothing concrete. After all, nobody below jounin really knows what's going on, and most of those with that rank are unaware as well.

Shikamaru tries to fit the facts together. His father, who has returned home for the past three weeks looking wrung out and exhausted. Two of the Sannin back in town. The mysterious masked Otokage who could be witnessed throwing his wealth and status around like a pointed stab. The woman who Choji assured him most readily was the cook that occasionally graced the morning markets seen at his side. Team Seven's taciturn and glum mood suddenly turning around. And now, an open invitation by what appears to be a noble's son to the very dwelling that holds the mysterious visitors.

Only, the boy (girl?) sitting across from him is as much a noble's child as he is a shinobi. He has the fine bone structure, pale skin, and soft hands of a pampered line, but also the cutting eyes and chakra control of a chuunin.

"Is that what they did to you?" Shikamaru asks, and he says it just to say it. He does not expect the temperature in the air to drop so rapidly that it seems to suck the air from his lungs, nor does he anticipate the silence that seems to take over at the hint of something murderous in the air.

The worst part is the ninja sitting across from him doesn't once falter in his act. He's still the picture of a cordial, gentle host, all androgynous beauty and docile smile. The opponent sitting across from him hasn't so much as blinked.

This is Killer Intent, Shikamaru thinks. It prickles at his neck like the breath of some great beast and he is very aware of his own morality in that single moment.

"Haku," comes a gruff, demanding voice. It sounds like gravel scraping across the bottom of a barrel, all deep and rugged.

Immediately the sensation cuts out, and the shadow user wants to breathe out a sigh of relief. Instead, he turns toward the newcomer, and his eyes widen in shock.

That is... That's one of the Seven Swordsman of the Hidden Mist. If the blade wasn't a dead giveaway, the hitai-ate tied around his head would be. There is no reason he should be casually standing beside Hatake Kakashi and the Lady of Otogakure.

"Hey! Zabuza, watch this!" Naruto cries loudly, demanding everyone's attention.

The boy inhales a breath of air, and Shikamaru feels his gut clench, because he knows this trick, but surely he wouldn't, not in front of such important people-

He does.

Naruto lets out the wettest, loudest belch that Shikamaru has heard come out of anybody but Ino in a long time. It breaks through the tense silence like a knife through skin and the swordsman seems to squint at Naruto while Team Seven's sensei slowly goes to cradle his head in his hands.

All at once, Sakura and Ino seem to realize that they are wrestling in the grass. Shikamaru has no idea why the belch is their alarm, but he knows that Ino is roughly shoved off from where she had straddled Sakura, and the two seem to immediately brush off their clothes.

"Six," the Mist-nin grunts, and Shikamaru has the wild thought that maybe he's rating the burp on a scale of one to ten.

"Don't encourage him," Hatake pleads, not quietly enough.

"You are correct," Shikamaru hears Shino whispered to Sasuke quietly. "He is an admirable shinobi, to be unfazed after such an event."

(Does this mean that Shino knew what was happening?)

"Six! That's two points better than last time!" Naruto cheers, forgetting the reason why the meeting was called. Beside him, Kiba looks absolutely skeptical of the score, as if he would contest it, but doesn't want to directly challenge the larger, obviously stronger male.

But belatedly, Shikamaru notices the same thing Hinata seems to have noticed. The young heiress hasn't looked away from the Lady of Sound since the trio made themselves known, and though her presence seems overshadowed by the swordsman and Kakashi Hatake, once he notices her, the Nara feels the hairs on the back of his neck rise.

There is something knowing about the way she looks out at them, and something that makes his instincts instruct him to find Asuma. The ninja sitting across from him seems to straighten his spine when she looks over, and he notices that he seems much younger than he did just a second ago.

The smile she gives Haku is almost like an indulgent scold. It seems to say that she knows exactly what he is doing, and it's more cute than troubling.

At least two jounin-level guards from two separate nations, robes that indicate wealth, and lodgings that indicate status.

Shikamaru makes sure to memorize her features, and he notes every detail he can cram inside his mind about her. From hypotheticals to actual facts, he stuffs his brain full.

The Nara Clan knows what kind of power can hide in shadows.

Tenzō knows that Watanabe is feeling off when she emerges from her quarters in the evening, not dressed in her flowing Rice Country robes, but in her casual wear. There are no shoes on her feet or

trinkets in her bun, and there is a nervous twitching in her fingers that makes his mouth salivate in anticipation.

Misaki seems to recognize this state as well, because the handmaiden utters no words when the Lady of Otogakure sweeps by. She simply follows after her, rolling up the sleeves of her kimono in anticipation.

In fact, it seems that no words need to be spoken at all, and though he can feel the curiosity rolling off his team, Tenzō follows after her without alerting her escorts. He traces her path through the winding halls, matching her quick pace, and his team trusts him to know what he is doing. Noiselessly they flitter through the shadows above them both, unseen spectres who have been observing her every move since she came here.

Watanabe heads straight to the kitchen, and she does not falter in her tightly controlled movements when she enters the strange facility. In fact, though he knows she has never been in this particular kitchen at all, she makes herself right at home, going so far to enforce her own rules seconds after she peeks around the cupboards and finds the cutting boards.

"No roof crawling while cooking. If I get so much as a speck of sandal grit in my dishes, I'm going to make every single one of you pay," she orders firmly, without looking away from the pantry.

Tenzō drops to the ground, silent as a shadow and stealthily as his feline mask implies. He can feel the bewilderment of his team, because ANBU guards aren't supposed to reveal themselves, but the idea makes him want to smile. The level of stealth required to tail Watanabe without her knowing is not one many are capable of, and he wasn't really trying to begin with. He figures she has known since the very first day that she had a team following her, and he would bet that it didn't take her long to deduce that he was on it.

Her handmaiden, however, is a civilian. The woman who had just begun washing the rice fumbles with the bowl in her hands when she

notices him, and water sloshes over the counter.

"Ninja," she breathes, and he can't tell if it is an observation or a curse.

"Focus, Misaki," Watanabe orders, getting out a variety of tools and ingredients from various cabinets and cupboards. The clacking of bowls and silverware against countertops covers the sound of his team hesitantly following his lead, drifting down from the ceiling beams and melting into the shadows of the room.

"How long-?"

"Don't think about it. We're doing a big meal tonight. I'm thinking Nasi Padang style, so make sure there's tons of rice. I'll get started on the beef dishes, and it looks like there's snapper here-fuck if I know why-and we'll do the shrimp and vegetables last because they cook so quick," Watanabe says, pulling an assortment of bundles from the refrigerator. The white paper packages crinkle noisily as she stacks them on her arm, peering through the depths of the cooling unit.

"Sir...?" one of his agents asks nervously, and Tenzo frowns. Silence in the field is important, and not every one of their targets will be as polite as Watanabe is, pretending not to have heard it. It doesn't matter how quiet the operative thought she was being, it wasn't quiet enough. He silences them all with a discreet hand sign held behind his back.

Tenzo focuses back on Ryuishi, who is absorbed in her task. There is a tautness to her shoulders, and her grip on the kitchen knife is white-knuckled as she slices open the parcels of meat. He has known her for years now, and this isn't the kind of cooking she pours her heart into, satisfied with the results no matter how they look. This is the kind of meal she makes when she feels directionless and under pressure, the kind that will be plated neatly and organized to her exacting standards.

It's in the way she does everything so methodically, her movements exact and surgical. With the new understanding he has of her, he can pinpoint that it's exactly the kind of efficient movement that a man like Orochimaru would train in a pupil. Clean, fluid motions that serves a purpose. There is no art, no humming or singing, only the absolute focus of creating something to meet an end.

In a way, he is glad she is trying to vent her frustration like this, not only because the end result is edible, but because it seems like the least self destructive of her outlets. On the other hand, he already knows that this isn't going to be enough.

He has a conflicting feeling in his gut. Something waits over the horizon like an ominous cloud, but he cannot hurry the future, and his instincts are telling him to enjoy the superficial peace while it lasts.

The sound of meat sizzling snaps his attention away from his thoughts, and the scent of freshly ground spices and cooking beef begins to waft through the air. It fills the kitchen to bursting and drifts through the halls, riding air currents like a siren song.

In a room near the gardens, Kakashi lifts his head, diverting attention away from the group of young ninja who have been training for the past hour. He sniffs the air twice, and saliva fills his mouth in anticipation. His stomach gurgles, and though he ignores it, it catches the attention of the swordsman sitting next to him.

Zabuza narrows his eyes and concentrates his senses, seeking out Ryuishi's familiar signature. It takes him a few moments to deduce her placement in the buildings, but when he locates it, he side-eyes the man next to him.

There is a beat of silence, and then Kakashi is sprawled on his side, shoved down in an effort to buy Zabuza time. He catches on to the other man's game quick enough, and he narrows his eye as he watches the speeding figure dart around a corner.

Like *hell* is he going to get served second in his own village. In the blink of an eye, he is gone as well.

Haku halts in his his practice, looking up to see the empty space where their two teachers once were. It is glaringly obvious where they went, given the force used in their exit.

"It's going to be dinner soon," he observes lightly. He notices that Sakura, who is attempting to identify the medicinal properties of the foxglove in front of her, only peeks up curiously while Naruto freezes in place, sending a wary glance his way.

"You know," the boy says, "we won't stand a chance against the adults by ourselves."

Haku meets his gaze head on, and he reviews his position. He's in trouble for the secrets he let out and treading thin ice when it comes to his surrogate mother. However, he is the most skilled in stealth arts among them, and she is a sucker for cute faces like theirs.

"What?" the Uchiha between them interjects, sensing an undercurrent here. There's a conversation going on in silence. (He knows about those now.)

"Kakashi-sensei likes to steal right from your hands," Naruto says.

"Zabuza is not above elbowing the face," Haku cites from experience.

"What kind of dinner is this?!" Sakura asks, alarmed.

Sasuke wants to know the answer as well, but he keeps his peace, reading between the lines. A meal with violence and stealth involved. Competition between them and their senseis. It looks like there will be a limited amount of goods to go around and that obtaining them will be a test.

He smirks. He gets it now.

"A truce," he declares out loud, joining in.

"For now," Haku agrees.

Which is how an ANBU team, two elite jounin, a technically-civilian chuunin-level fighter, a squad of genin, and an actual civilian all find themselves in the same room, attempting to distract the cooks or resist the temptation of being distracted.

Ryuishi is fairly certain that Orochimaru was even in here at one point, because the Gulai Talua is missing, and that's his usual go-to dish.

"No!" she snaps, thumping her wooden spoon down hard on someone's reaching knuckles. The hand retracts immediately, but another set of fingers darts in from the opposite side, almost too fast to follow. By the time she throws her foot out to kick shin, Kakashi has danced away, his jaw working furiously under his mask.

"Son of a-! It's not going anywhere! You guys need to settle down and be patient-MISAKI! Stop feeding them!" Ryuishi barks.

Misaki sends her a guilty glance, turning away from the group of dewy eyed children and hilariously out-of-place ANBU members who seemed to have ganged up on the weakest link. She slowly retracts the offered plate, but not before several more inches are removed from the top of the dish by chopstick laden hands.

"If you keep this up there's not going to be any left for an actual meal. It's food, not anarchy," Ryuishi snipes, right before she is nudged from behind into a naked chest. She grunts on impact, and the wooden spoon is freed from her grasp, leaving her weaponless.

"This is the meal," Zabuza informs her, exposing his sharp-toothed grin. "The weak are meat; the strong eat."

" *The weak are -*" Ryuishi repeats incredulously, sending him a disbelieving glance. "Are you high? Who the hell told you that?"

Tenzō, are you responsible for this?"

"Wasn't me," comes the denial from the shadows.

Kakashi uses this opportunity to lock onto his victim, advancing on the darkness. She turns away from the massacre waiting to happen, lamenting the perfectly plated dishes she had set out and lost to whoever.

"All this food sharing is going to make someone sick," she grumbles.

"Actually, the garlic in a lot of these dishes has antibacterial properties. Everything tastes really good, by the way," Sakura chirps from her side.

Ryuishi blinks and looks down. Sure enough, Team Seven has gathered around her. Naruto holds the place of honor as plate bearer. It's a mixture of the foods from the many dishes floating around the kitchen, compiled by them and guarded from enemies. Sasuke takes the right guard while Haku finds his place on point.

The image is so cute she sears it into her mind for safekeeping, helping herself to a slice of snapper. The others do not complain, because the chef is allowed to eat whatever they please.

"It's spicy," Sasuke comments, but he doesn't exactly sound like he's complaining.

"Eh. This is the light stuff. Ask to see Naruto's recipe book at some point and try the originals. They'll light your mouth on fire," she informs them.

Kakashi appears from wherever he was harassing the ANBU. He absorbs this information and stores it away for later. He knows many an Akimichi that would pay top dollar for such a thing. But first-

Zabuza notes the gleam in the other man's eye, and by some silent communication, the two make a plan. In half a heartbeat, Ryuishi is

sent spinning into the children, a curse falling from her lips. They squawk as she bowls into the group, and they break rank to attempt in an effort to not be slammed by several kilos of unsteady kunoichi.

Naruto in particular finds himself isolated from the gang's safety, and it takes only a few seconds for the plate in his hands to be snatched away and hefted victoriously above his head. He protests the theft loudly, and his team groans in unison once they realize they have been duped.

Zabuza and Kakashi split the plate between them, picking at the goods, and a hearty chuckle fills their ears. Regaining her balance, Ryuishi can't help the smile that breaks across her face, or the low laughter she lets out.

The sound mingles with the low buzz of the chaotic atmosphere, and many will remember this particular night for years to come. Whether it's because it was the strangest mission they ever received, the first time they found a sense of unity in the entropy, or the first time 'us' and 'them' became 'we', people will recall the evening fondly. And even though it might not be at the forefront of their minds when they look back, her laughter will echo in their ears like like a ghost's.

In Which There is Some Changes

I do not own Naruto.

It's a nice day for an ambush, Kisame thinks idly.

Standing beside him on the wide tree limb, his partner stares out into the forest with an unreadable expression. There is a good chance that the young man knows this place, and that these trees are no stranger to him, but he gives nothing away. His face is a blank mask that Kisame still cannot read, not even after all this time.

The warm Fire Country sun filters through the trees, and the bright blue sky peeks between the canopy. Golden rods of light cut through the dense foliage, and eventually touch the ground here and there, creating a patchwork of illumination. The leaves rustle and sigh as the breeze sweeps through them, similar to the sound of the surf far off in the distance. Everything is so calm and green here, bright and earthy in a way Kirigakure never was. It's strange to think that this cradle of nature grew the fierce man at his side.

Kirigakure was never this vibrant and plentiful. He can recall the heavy fog of Water Country in vivid detail, the smell of decay and moisture festering in the air alongside the musk of weapons oil and saltwater. It was the sort of place you would fully expect to give birth to hardy people. The damp and cold didn't allow those with weaker stock to rise up and see the sun that burned above the mist.

It's been a long time since he has been in Kirigakure, though. Longer still since he has seen his comrades, and the years that have passed since she left are great in number indeed.

Thirteen years is quite a while, he muses. Enough time for nothing to be the same.

If someone had told his fifteen-year-old self what would happen, he would have gutted them without looking back. Back then it was war, and everything he knew was blood and violence. His unit was no exception to that rule, but it was blood in violence in a different way. It was the kind of blood drawn between a family, and the kind of violence that allowed them to grow together. He never would have thought that the genin that he took under his wing-and later the chunin under his command-would end up where they are now. Hell, he never even fathomed defection until the moment was upon him.

Time has a funny way of changing things, though, and now he's an S-rank criminal in an organization of S-rank criminals. His teacher turned out to be a disloyal bastard, and the fellow swordsmen of his generation are scattered or dead. The only one he really gives a damn about stands guard over the girl that ended up being the biggest mess that Water Country ever produced.

Zabuza may be even more loyal than him, if he thinks about it. He doesn't think the taciturn man ever really doubted his place in the world once. To him, it was all fairly obvious that wherever he went, she would be there as well, and vice versa. The only obstacle was managing to get there, and having the strength to maintain the unity. All that time they spent in Kiri pointedly ignoring a gaping hole in the unit, he trained and toiled to get stronger, to rise to where he thought he needed to be, and never once did he forget Kisame. One of the Akatsuki member's greatest regrets was not going back and asking his brother in arms to join with him. Maybe if he had, Zabuza wouldn't have gone rogue, ensnared by all this scheming.

It's funny that she is the complete opposite of that, though. Not that she's disloyal, but that she has no idea what loyalty even means. She never once knew her place in the world or her goal in life. She flittered about, gathering support and hoarding power, but she had no real purpose for it. It's like she can't decide which face to wear or which path to choose. Her chaos and disorder became a whirlpool, sucking whole countries in, and she ensnared everyone in the mess she made, capturing all the wrong attention.

His lips pull back into a scowl, and he glowers at the pristine imagery before him.

Kisame doubts she even knows the number of assassination orders that have been put out on her, not that anybody knew who or where she was. It started in Kiri, when a whole remaining nation bayed for the blood of the person who burned their home. Then again, when the Rakki Ryu started meddling elsewhere. Crimelords, merchant conglomerates, and now even nobles want her head. More than once they have disappeared, taken care of before he could get the chance, but some he has had to personally dissuade.

Now though, now there won't be anymore at all. He always had some sort of vague plan to collect his unit before it came to a close, but she went and made herself a target. She hoarded her power and she made herself one of the most influential pieces on the board, and he doubts all the blame can be placed on Orochimaru's machinations.

Don't get him wrong, he loathes that treacherous snake more than he dislikes just about anything. Not only is the man a self-serving, disloyal traitor, but he's a sadist with no value for human life and no aims but satisfying his own curiosity. The fact that he was anywhere near her while she was still part of his unit makes him sick, and the thought of her as he last saw her under his care makes him want to break things.

It's simply the fact that the girl he knew had a habit of following whims that are better off ignored, leading to actions that should never occur. Case in point, when they first met, she stuck her hand inside his mouth and risked losing a limb in order to prove her genuine desire to befriend him. He probably should have known then and there that she was insane, but she hid it surprisingly well. Well enough that she fooled entire countries into believing she wasn't mad, but deviously genius.

(If he's honest, she might be a bit of both.)

He won't assume that she is purely a victim, but he will not deny that she has suffered. She may boast and showboat all she wants, but that's simply one of the faces she wears, the masks she uses to cover up the scrambled chaos inside, and Orochimaru would have been endlessly entertained by it. A play with only one actor trying to fill all the parts, all for him to twist to meet his own needs.

(*"You know her teacher cut her throat?" Zetsu taunts in his memories.*)

He clenches his hand into a fist, and the bark under his fingers cracks into pieces. His rage is undirected and it makes him feel impotent and even angier.

Look at where she is now, the end product of lies and secrets. Is she happy, placing her faith in nobody but herself, trusting vipers that lead her into dens of snakes? Is she content knowing that Zabuza is at the mercy of a broken system and her own whims?

Konoha is full of backstabbing and secret deals, a place that hides its blood-filled history under the guise of smiles and lies. It greets her with one hand while the other pays goods to have her done away with.

No wonder Itachi left this dump.

"Kisame," the aforementioned man says quietly, remaining hidden though no one is around for miles. "Control yourself. It won't do to alert them of our presence."

"I'm still concealed," he bites back. Not like it matters, though. There's no one but them for kilometers.

There is a beat of silence, and Kisame doesn't notice the way his partner glances over to him. His coal eyes examine the faux relaxed form of his partner, and he finds that the perturbed look on the man's face appears unnatural. Sharp teeth and shark-like features do not pull off brooding very well.

"I can retrieve the target on my own," Itachi offers. Kisame is showing a startling amount of emotional attachment to the case, and though Itachi has his objections to apprehending her, he is willing to do it himself.

He owes her a debt twice over now, but that does not mean he can let her escape. She has drawn too much attention, and she must lie in the bed she has made. However, he will not let her walk this path alone, as she did not let him walk his without a hand to hold onto.

Itachi doesn't know where he would have ended up without that hand, who he would be today without the little hope she gave him. He is concerned about her relationship with Orochimaru, of course, but he also understands that she kept her word. The children remain in Iron Country, far away from the grasping hands of her and anyone she might associate with, and his brother stands in the public eye. He is guarded by not only Itachi's own ANBU captain, but friends that he has formed, friends that she saw fit to raise as her own. She guarded his heart by placing it alongside her own, and he is thankful for that.

"No," Kisame disagrees, staring off into the distance.

Itachi lets the silence settle back in, comfortable in his own contemplation. It's nostalgic to be in the sunshine and fresh air after spending so long in the humid and moist environment of Ame. It feels comforting, and-dare he say it?-nice on his skin. He could pass the whole day in this tree, enjoying the quiet sounds of nature and soaking up the sunshine like a cat.

It is rare that he is able to feel this sense of peace and serenity, and he intends to enjoy it while it lasts. Peace like this will not come around often once things get moving, and he intends to savor every moment of it while he can.

Tonight will change everything, and the power balance will once again shift. In favor of who, he doesn't know. All he knows is that his summons will alert them when it is time to make their move.

The hours tick by slowly, as they tend to do during stakeouts. The sun goes from it's zenith, to somewhere in the west, and then finally it disappears beneath the horizon. The first star appears, followed by another and then another. The waxing moon rises into a sea of celestial bodies, shining it's cold silvery light on to the world below, an inverse of the warm golden orb that hung in its place before.

Dark wings blend in with the night, and though it is usually a diurnal creature, the crow navigates the darkness without hassle. Itachi turns to face it, and as he sits in the crook of branch and trunk, he lifts his head in languid curiosity.

The bird alights on Itachi's shoulder, and it turns its head to the south, its inky black beak glittering like obsidian in the night. One of its talons scratches a single line down his sleeve before it disappears in smoke.

"She's alone," Itachi announces quietly. "It's time."

Something in Kisame's stomach leaps up into his throat as he goes to stand, and he won't admit he's nervous. Not out loud, at least.

Thirteen years is a long time, he thinks again. He wipes his palms against his cloak, and he swallows the saliva in his mouth. A whole lot can change in the course of that time. A boy can face the end of a war, and he can grow into a man. A girl can lose sight of what is real, and she can become a woman.

He wipes those thoughts from his head, because they were never men or women, boys or girls. They were Kaijuu, and monsters have rules of their own.

Feeling his resolve become firmer, he lets out a breath, grounding himself. He flexes his muscles and twists a bit, working out some of the stiffness that found its way in while he rested. Hopefully, this doesn't end up as a double-blind ambush, but he'll go in prepared for anything.

"Let's go," he orders quietly, and he feels a reassuring hand brush across his shoulder for a second, so quick he might have imagined it. For an expressionless kid, Itachi sure is empathetic.

Kisame flashes him a grin in thanks.

They set off, and the landscape passes by in a blur. A sense of anticipation hangs heavy in the air, and Kisame is vaguely aware that he is glad this is happening at night. For some reason, it feels right.

The trees give no indication of breaking away, but he becomes aware of a presence in the night before he sees her. It's the sort of instinctual knowledge that elite shinobi gain after years of experience, a sense that really isn't a sense at all, and it jostles around in the back of his head. High above the ground he pauses, his keen eyes scanning the forest floor, and far beneath him, he sees her.

It isn't startling, and it isn't jarring, but there is a some unnameable thing that fills him up at the sight of her back. He isn't sure if it's nostalgia or anger, fondness or bitterness.

She doesn't look like a god, or a noblewoman. She doesn't look like the eleven-year-old girl he knew, or the teenager from the blurry photograph on his wall. She looks like a person, small and fallible.

She isn't the willowy beauty that her mother was, or the brick wall of strength he is, but something in between the two. Her shirt is no longer a dove-grey turtleneck, but an off-color top that exposes her stomach. For a second, he is surprised at the way she displays herself, because even from here he can see the faded remnant of a scar poking along her ribs. It takes him a moment to identify the disfigurement as his own parting gift to her, and his gut churns.

He didn't know that it left a mark.

She cocks her head, her ear pointed toward the sky, and the beads of her hairpin click together. The action is reminiscent of a dog, and he wonders why she is doing it.

The wind sweeps through the trees, and the foliage ruffles. Around her feet, the short grass ripples like waves, and the shadows cast by the moonlight make the forest floor look like water.

"You know, when I run off to be alone, it generally means I want to left by myself," she gripes, and the pitch of her voice is all wrong. It's not high and odd, raspy because of an old injury. It's low and husky, and he can barely detect that there's anything wrong at all.

He takes a deep breath in, and he forces himself to focus. She's already acknowledged there's someone there, which is impressive, but she doesn't seem to be afraid. If anything, she's scolding, like people often interrupt her alone time.

He leaps down from the trees, landing lightly on the balls of his feet. Itachi remains above, a scout and a lookout all at once.

She twists her head around to get a look at the intruders, and he notices that her eyes are different and yet the same. They are still a glittering empty black, reflecting the stars, but the lashes are longer, and the almond shape seems less childish and more pronounced.

"Seriously, who the fuck-" she begins, and he watches those eyes. Watches them as they widen in wonder, and he memorizes the way her breath catches in her lungs at the sight of him. The rest of her sentence goes unsaid, and she freezes.

"It's been a long time," he says.

For a moment, it looks like she can't form any words at all, and she turns around completely to look at him. He views her face to face for the first time in years, and now it seems to truly hit him-how much time has passed, and how much they have grown. She was always smaller than him, but now he seems to tower above her, and

her muscular limbs are dwarfed by his own. Her face is... It's so different, holding only the barest traces of its previous roundness.

Her lips-bigger now, not thin-seem to turn upward, and for a moment his heart aches, because her first reaction is to smile at him. He can see the way her face lights up for a moment, flickering into joy and elation. She breathes in and seems about a step away from embracing him.

Her eyes leave his face, catch sight of his cloak, and she stops.

Kisame watches the dawning realization take over her, and he wonders how she ever managed to lie at all. She's too expressive, and it's easy to watch her lips turn downward, her brows furrow, and her nose scrunch as her face floods with betrayed understanding.

" *You*," she breathes, flicking her eyes up to his face. Her hands raise unconsciously in defense, and he steadies himself for what must be done.

"I waited *thirteen years* for you," she hisses, and he hates how much he can hear Orochimaru in that voice. He hates how much that man has corrupted her, how much she allowed herself to be tainted.

"You came back to use me," she says venomously. There is fury lacing every word that she molds, a rage and hurt that burns inside of her.

"It's time for you to stop, Ryuishi," he states firmly, because she needs that now. She's angry and she feels betrayed, but she needs something stable. A support.

"How *dare* you! How dare you come back and tell me to stop like you know a damn thing. You son of a bitch!" she screeches, and he advances on her. It stings that she retreats away from him on instinct, walking backwards while her hands begin to shake with anger.

"You made yourself a target, and I'm sorry it has to happen like this. We can't stay long, and I can explain later," he says, closing the gap between them.

She lashes out so quick that the first strike takes him by surprise. Her fist catches him square across the jaw, and his vision bursts into stars for a moment. He hears a toneless ringing in his ears, and he can taste the coppery tang of blood on his tongue.

So that intel about her being a taijutsu user wasn't lying, then.

"What about Zabuza?" she accuses him. "What about-?"

"Anywhere you go, he will follow," Kisame grits out, spitting a sharp-edged tooth to the side. His tongue pokes the hollow where it once grew, and he knows his jaw is at least fractured. She hits lit a sledgehammer.

His pinprick pupils turn back to her, and she looks feral, working herself into a rage. He has seconds before she flares out her chakra and alerts the whole village of their presence.

Kisame plays to his strengths, using his size advantage and the element of surprise, engulfing her body in a swift movement, trapping her arms against his chest. He can feel her legs kick out at him, leaving a wake of bruises on his skin, and she snarls into the fabric of his cloak, trying to sink her teeth in.

"We can be adults?" he offers. "Or I can treat you like the mad dog you're being."

She inhales, and he hears a tear as her nails catch on his cloak. Her scream is muffled by his chest, and he frowns. Mad dog it is.

Kisame strains to hold her with one arm as her thighs constrict around his waist with crushing force. He reaches down into a pouch and slams the butt of his kunai against her skull before she can fully put out the call for help.

She slumps against him, a dead weight, but he scowls. She still managed a small flare, and knowing his luck, there will be watchers.

Sure enough, when he looks up into the tree branches, Itachi is staring off into the distance, as if tracing a network of unseen messages across the night.

"We need to leave," the Uchiha informs him, and Kisame shifts the body in his arms around. She looks peaceful like this, the pin having fallen out of her hair and her face lax in unconsciousness. Her cool skin is a relief against his feverish hands, and he belatedly realizes that she still smells the same after all these years, like saltwater and pear blossoms.

"It's going to be okay," he whispers under his breath, hefting her higher in his arms, allowing her head to fall on the crook of his shoulder while his other arm catches her beneath her knees. He makes his every movement gentle, knowing her recent injury has only just begun to heal, and it feels right, to carry her like this. To have her weight in his arms and have her safety in his hands once more. He should have never let her leave that night, and he won't ever make the same mistake again.

He leaps upwards, following Itachi and cradling the woman in his arms.

Yes, she may have been mad, but she'll understand. He just has to get her away from the toxic influence of Konoha and that dirty snake. Once he rips their hooks out of her, she'll see the truth, and Zabuza will chase after her like he's always done. They'll be a unit again, finally fighting for the right side.

An hour passes by, and Tenzō feels muted panic.

Usually, Watanabe gives the watch team a slip between the hours of midnight and two am, using a different tactic each time. It's hard to

follow her, it always has been, but this visit in particular has shown that when she puts her mind to it, she can be devastatingly devious.

Yesterday night she used the bathroom, and somehow slipped out through the window the team had previously assumed was too small for anyone to slip through. They had discounted the fact that she had been trained by Orochimaru of the Sannin, and things like joints and bone structure went ignored in the greater scheme of things

Tonight, after the buzz in the kitchen died down and everyone had retreated to their separate quarters, the team had followed her back to her rooms where she had bedded down. It turned out that somewhere, somehow, she had made a switch with a water clone and they only caught on after the clone had burst while a weak flare went up to the east. Immediately, he had gone after the signal, thinking that perhaps Jiraiya had come crawling back and confronted her again, but now he is not sure. The grid search reveals nothing, and the area where her flare went up set off his tracker's scent triggers for blood.

In this moment, he cannot help but feel he is in far over his head. The storm clouds have arrived, and something stinks of foul play. He cannot solve this riddle alone, and even though calling for backup makes him feel ashamed, he doesn't hesitate to contact those that know her best and bring them to her last known whereabouts.

The Mist delegation and their shared ward are already up, and it looks like they assumed the same thing he did. Their annoyed mood drops sharply into something dark when he informs them that Jiraiya is still in his appointed lodging, and that Watanabe is nowhere to be found.

"Where," Zabuza says, and it isn't a question, but a demand.

Tenzō shows them.

The two of them search the forest floor, not the branches or trunks, and Tenzō is there to bear witness when the truth becomes evident.

It is Haku who finds it, and he lets out a whimper when he does. The noise attracts the attention of every adult, and in the silver light of the moon, they watch him bend over and pick up a long, thin object from the ground.

When Tenzo catches sight of what it is, he sucks in a breath.

"Zabuza-sama," Haku says, holding the telltale hairpin in his palm. His face is open and wide, no longer holding a gentle and threatening smile, but painfully hopeful.

The swordsman falters for a moment, and he searches the grass around the boy, but Tenzō thinks that little more needs to be said. That hair pin is an identifying mark of the Rakki Ryuu, a one-of-a-kind object that is absolutely priceless. She never just leaves without it, or drops it on the ground. Even when her hair is down, she carries it on her person.

Tenzō is wrong.

The swordsman snarls, and he snatches something off off the ground, holding it up to the light of the stars to confirm his suspicions. Gripped tight between his fingertips is a tooth, sharp and cutting. Its root still remains red, bloodied with a bit of gum attached.

Tenzō knows why they call him the Demon of the Mist in that moment, because his face flickers. There is something cut and raw, bleeding and hurt for the barest second. A sound escapes his throat, something like the deep whine of a wounded animal, and it quickly morphs into a growl. Rage, hot and pure, boils out of his skin, and the air around him erupts into a hideous miasma of chakra. Phantoms made of energy howl and screech without sound, and the air bubbles with the promise of violence.

His expression, though... his expression is gone. Tenzō once excelled in Root's bastardized version, but now that he sees the product of Kirigakure conditioning firsthand, he knows there is no

recreating it. The man is a blank slate, and the agents cannot read anything from him but a sense of danger.

"Get the snake," Zabuza orders.

"No," Haku whispers. He looks halfway to tears, clutching the pin, moisture gathering in his eyes. "No. Nonononono. We were... she was- *no* ."

"I said, *get the snake*," the man orders again, and Haku stiffens, clasp the pin tight to his chest. He chokes back a pained sound, and then he is gone, leaping through the trees like a hare running from a predator.

Zabuza turns threatening eyes on the ANBU team, and Tenzō feels the crushing guilt before the man can even open his mouth. This is his fault, he was supposed to guard her. She was his responsibility.

"The group from River came back," he says, and then he's stalking away, picking up speed.

Tenzō's stomach drops, because it's not that she ran, but she was taken. She was taken, and the other man knows who did it. His hand is clenched so tight around the tooth that a line of crimson oozes out of between his fingers and slides across his knuckles.

"Inform the Hokage," Tenzō commands his team, and they do not question him. Leaves rain down where they once stood, and he himself glides after Zabuza. The moon makes their shadows stretch out far behind them, warped and disfigured by movement, and the wind rustles through the leaves like an ill omen.

In the distance, he can feel the pinging of chakra flares as far as his senses can stretch. The man in front of them has tripped a few alarms, but his squad is triggering failsafes as they move. Like sparks in the wake of a rocket, signatures flare up in answer to the call, and he feels his face go blank when one roars into life ahead of him. It's slick and distinct, something from his worst memories. It

reminds him of weightlessness, of being in a lab beneath the earth. Of darkness and pain.

He doesn't turn away from it. There is no choice but to confront his fear, because Zabuza does not stop when they reach their lodgings. He hardly even slows at the sight of Orochimaru, who stands illuminated from behind by the light of the building. Beside him is Haku, and her hair pin is still clutched against his collar.

"What is the meaning of this?" Orochimaru demands, his expression cold and livid.

Zabuza doesn't answer. He simply whips his bleeding hand forward, slinging the object curled inside of it at the snake, who catches it almost lazily. He storms right past Orochimaru, grasping the boy by his elbow with his bloody hand.

There is one painful moment when Tenzō passes by the one who created him, and he feels his heart stutter painfully in his chest with terror, but the other man doesn't even notice him. His golden eyes are locked onto the bloodied tooth in his hand, and his face is contorting into some sort of horrible snarl.

In a blink, it's over like it never happened, and the figure from his nightmares is behind him. The only reason Tenzō is even aware of him is because he fills up the night with a wordless shout of pure rage.

"Zabuza, Zabuza we have to get her-" Haku begins to babble, and he sounds hysterical. There is something frantic and desperate in his eyes as he claws at the swordsman's arm. They walk through the decadent wooden hallways at a brisk pace, and Tenzō vaguely feels like an intruder. These two have been staying here, and they belong, but not him.

"You're not coming," Zabuza says in a tone that brokers no argument, and Haku sucks in a breath.

"What do you mean?" he whispers.

"This isn't for kids," Zabuza states.

"I'm not a kid!" Haku protests, and the swordsman shakes his arm *hard*, sending the boy stumbling away from him. He pauses before the door to their rooms, and the air grows thick with that violent chakra.

Ever so slowly, he turns to look at the boy, piercing him with his eyes. Tenzō attempts to blend in with the shadows on instinct, to melt into the walls and be one with the scenery. This is something he should not witness, this he knows, but he will not make the mistake of letting anyone out of his sight again.

"You will stay here," Zabuza orders menacingly. His voice is short and clipped, emphasizing how very serious he is.

" *I won't lose another mother!* " Haku bellows, and the room goes still. A quiet hush falls for a moment, and Tenzō absorbs the words from his spot.

Mother . Not sibling, not sister. Mother, and not the first one that has gone.

It is impressive how unmoved Zabuza is, how untouched by the words he appear to be. His training lasted far longer than Tenzō's, and it shows because there isn't even a flicker of remorse or indecision on his face or in his body language. He's fully committed to his decision, and he has made his choice.

"The last time children were around when we fought, she almost died," the man states without inflection. It's a cold, sterile fact, not meant to hurt, but to explain.

Haku flinches, and after a second he appears to fold in on himself. He cradles the bone hairpin in his palms like a lifeline, turning his eyes to the ground in submission. This time the pain shines through,

the fear of loss and the growing hurt. The moisture in the corners of his eyes overflows, sliding down the porcelain skin of his cheeks and dripping on to his flowing sleeves.

"I can't lose you both," he chokes, and Tenzo knows that this child has known hurt, has known loss and pain. He can read it in the delicate structure of his face and the desperate curl of his fingers.

His caretaker raises his arm, and with a sort of gentleness that must not come often from him, he places his hand on the younger boys head, his palm flat on the teen's hair.

The boy hiccups, leaning into the touch for a moment. "Just come back," he finally snuffles.

The hand slides from the top of his head and comes to rest by the man's side once more. He turns around to face the entrance of his room, and the next words are not whispered, but stated in the firm voice of a commander.

"Give us something to come back for."

Sarutobi Hiruzen is up before the ANBU make it past his window.

He has spent a long, long time as Hokage, longer than he should have, and he has only ever been woken by ANBU a handful of times in his tenure. The first was on the eve of the Third Shinobi war, the night that tensions snapped and all hell broke loose. The second time was while he technically wasn't Hokage, but rather, retired, and the Nine-Tails reigned free for the first time since the founding of the village itself. The third, and what he had hoped was the final time, was the night of the Uchiha Massacre.

It seems that that was not meant to be, however, because for a fourth time he greets an incoming squad of agents dressed in nothing but his nightwear, his weathered face tired and drawn.

"Report," he snaps, feeling the cool night in his joints. His body is not what it once was, and it aches in ways it never used to.

"Sir, the Otogakure delegate Watanabe Ryuishi is missing. Searches reveal evidence of foul play. Last seen approximately two hours ago," reports agent Crane.

Adrenaline hits him like a shock to the system, and the lingering traces of sleep flee him like little more than a memory. Never mind that he may be wearing a flannel suit with stitches from his late wife, things are already out of hand.

"Jackal! Find Hound now, and tell him to be ready to set out!" he barks. He needs a tracker as fast as possible, and Hound is one of the best. He is up to date with the information needed to trail the victim, and there is little risk of a leak with him. "Tell me everything you know, Crane. I don't care how small, this situation has just turned S-rank."

A shadow departs from the main group, and he waves the rest of them inside after him. He can feel the traces of Jiraiya's chakra in the room down the hall, stirring from its light rest. The man will be waking soon.

"At around 0200, the previously assigned person of interest under watch revealed itself to be a Water Clone, while squad leader Cat sensed a flare to the east. Immediately we set out to investigate, but upon finding nothing, team leader Cat made the decision to bring in subjects who knew the one observed best. We returned to the area, and on the second sweep, an item of extreme personal importance to the subject was found abandoned. Nearby a single incisor was found, unique due to its sharpened and serrated quality. Kirigakure delegate Momochi Zabuza then announced the likely conclusion that the subject had been abducted by the same group that attacked the teams in River. The captain then ordered us to alert you to the possibility while he remained with the delegates," Crane recites on, and Sarutobi feels his heart stutter in his chest.

S-rank indeed. The idea of criminals of that caliber inside his village, inside his home, close enough to take a woman who was supposed to be under the guard of Fire Country... It makes him taste bile.

"Gather your captain, and tell him he is now assigned to the retrieval team of Momochi and Hound," Sarutobi orders, and he hears the door creak open behind him. It's Jiraiya's polite way of alerting him to his presence, but the Hokage is distracted.

He won't send Hound out alone, not after criminals of this caliber. He has a long history of working very, very well with Cat, and they both are knowledgeable of the subject. They also provide an eye on the Swordsman, who is no doubt prepping his own gear for a retrieval mission. That boy will carve his way through the country to get her back if he has to, and he will pay no mind to the cost of his actions. He has faith that his own will have more sense than that, but not by much. Whoever took her provoked the wrong people.

"Sensei..." Jiraiya warns, and it takes the Hokage a moment to sense what he is talking about. A familiar chakra signature closing in quick on this location, oozing hostile intent. Truly, the student has surpassed the teacher. They both have.

The ANBU squad tenses not long after, but Sarutobi frowns at them. "I gave you your orders!" he snaps, and the group hesitates for a moment before taking off once more.

It's a good thing they do, because the next figure that appears would have cut clean through them. He has seen his students upset, and he has seen them sad, but he doesn't know if he has ever seen Orochimaru in quite this state of fury before. He doesn't so much as come through the window as he does knock out the wall, a dramatic entrance more suited to his female teammate than himself.

"YOU!" Orochimaru *roars*, his face twisted into a snarl. The wood that once framed his now shattered window crumples in his students pale hands, his skin made almost luminescent by the silver light of the moon.

"Do you think you are *clever*, old man? Sending her estranged teammate to collect her? Did you think that I was bluffing before now? You have brought your own ruin upon yourself and your whole village!" he spits. He looms menacingly, his anger burning hot and fierce instead of controlled and cold.

"Did you think it would end with this? That I would step down? Nobody can escape now, you miserable, wrinkled ape! Do you have any idea who they are? What they aim to do? And you just handed over what could be one of the most important pieces on the board!" he hisses, coiling in on himself. Like a viper he writhes, venom dripping from his voice.

"Orochimaru-" the Hokage tries, taking a step back. He has seldom seen this level of emotion in his student before, this amount of raw anger. The man is wrath incarnate; he is on the warpath.

"Listen instead of preaching for once, and listen well," he intones darkly. "You have doomed everything. Whether she lives or dies, you lose. I will make sure of it."

"You think I do not know this!?" the Hokage cuts in, because he knows that Orochimaru could go on all night. "You think I would commit a petty act of vengeance when I know exactly what the cost would be? I have nothing to do with this. If you won't believe that I would not betray you, believe that I would not cut the neck of my own village to do so."

"Then who?" Orochimaru growls. "Who would be so foolish to ignite a war unlike anything we have known? Who would wipe an enemy from the the map, regardless of what would follow?"

"Danzō," a new voice interjects.

All eyes are drawn to the speaker, and Jiraiya crouches behind his teacher, having observed the confrontation from the beginning. He stares at the others, wary of attack, and he voices his reasoning out loud.

"Danzō is a warhawk. If he thought a threat to the food supply and the economy at large could be eliminated, and a power vacuum would open up, he would take the chance to do so. He knows that Konoha has survived war in the past, and with Otogakure weakened by her loss, he would expect that the majority of enemies would be civilians. He would take that chance," Jiraiya says slowly, working it out. "He did it once already with the Uchiha, didn't he? They threatened us from the inside, and the structure of the village, but once they were gone, we came back, no matter the cost."

Sarutobi sucks in a breath, because his old friend was already going to face trial, but now he doubts that he'll even make it that far. "We don't know-" he tries, but Orochimaru goes louder.

"Your lenience to this man has sealed your fate. I want him *dead* and I will do it *myself*-"

"-hey, we need to get back to the point-"

"EVERYBODY SHUT THE HELL UP," a fourth voice bellows, and the three men pause as the person makes themselves known, having for once come through the front door like any reasonable person.

Tsunade stands glowering at them all, her arms crossed beneath her impressive chest, and her face radiating displeasure. "We have a real situation on our hands that needs to be handled *yesterday*. You three can either bicker with each other like twelve-year-olds, or we can pull our heads out of our asses and actually do something to stop this from happening. Yes, Danzō needs to be dealt with, but our focus should be on averting a *world war*," she tells them frankly, and really, it's not a choice at all.

Orochimaru seems to gain composure like he never lost it in the first place, straightening up and smoothing his features out until there is no trace he was ever angry at all. (Save for the broken wall.)

Jiraiya spares a glance towards his teacher, but then looks around to his fellow teammates and feels something like hope flutter in his

throat. His palms sweat, because it hasn't been like this for so very, very long.

For the first time since the fall of Hanzō, the three Sannin stand in the same room under the light of the same moon. Broken glass and splinters of wood are scattered across the floor, and their teacher stands in the center of them all wearing little more than his sleep clothes, but something has changed.

There are lines between them, but they are faded and blurred, and the sides they chose aren't really opposites at all. In fact, one could even say that the three of them are in agreement, united together.

Almost like a team.

AN: I accidentally hit the back button after I wrote this once already so I'm sorta rushing it now. Uhm, Surprise. This is what happens when you dodge your security patrols to sneak out and have alone time when an incredibly talented organization of criminals is after your fine ass. It's also what happens when you make allies with people who are renown for being two faced and think you've outplayed the best of them. A variable you forgot pops up and whips you in the nuts. POV shifts in each chapter due to the nature of this new arc.

A thank you to my favoriters, followers, and lurkers. A highfive and apology to my reviewers, who keep me strong.

A congratulations to my Beta, Enbi, who passed a milestone recently. They keep me on track and writing. #bless

Question: How do you think Ryuishi could have prevented Kisame getting the impression he has of her OR What plans do the Akatsuki have?

In Which Time is Unclear

I do not own Naruto.

There is a sense of disbelief lingering inside of Kisame that he does his best to reason away, but it clings. He supposes that it's not an incredibly odd thing, per say, but he also knows that he needs to focus on the present and not be distracted by his emotions at a time like this.

The temperature around them has been dropping steadily as their journey continues, and the blue skies have already started to fade into grey. The wind is no longer a pleasant breeze, but a cutting knife that slices through the fabric of his clothes and raises goosebumps on his skin. It's nothing compared to the chill of Kirigakure, but he knows it usually would be enough to make the woman in his arms uncomfortable. It's fortunate that she will not wake for a while yet.

Kisame thinks that his teammate's face is appallingly tranquil when she sleeps.

He brushes a stray lock of hair out her face, the blue skin of his fingers contrasting with her own butterscotch complexion. Her cheek feels smooth and soft beneath his digits, and when she's like this, it's hard to imagine the wrathful, furious woman that confronted him before.

Instinctively she stirs, chasing the warmth of his palm, and he breathes out a sigh, his breath fogging in the air around him. He would worry about waking her, but the syringe full of anesthesia Itachi is emptying into the veins of her arm reassures him. She will not disrupt their escape, and she won't be conscious to make crafty plans until they reach the safety of the base. He simply has to keep an eye on her respirations patterns and body temperatures.

He feels the puff of her breath against his hand as it trails lower, scrapping over the exposed flesh of her throat. The lines that mars it is faded and stretched with time and growth, but it is glaringly obvious none the less. It sticks out like a brand or a leash, and he feels that disbelief again, that distance from reality.

She used to be so small and skinny, a deceptive storm trapped inside a tiny little body. She was vain to the point of absurdity, always checking her appearance in reflective surfaces and taking painstaking care of her appearance. Everytime she was muddied and bloodied on the battlefield, she acted repulsed by herself until she could bathe and change. He used to think one of the reasons that she specialized in underwater combat was so that the stains wouldn't have time to set in, and she could always look the cleanest out of the three of them.

But here she is, wearing her disfigurements like jewelry, shamelessly revealing the fact that she could have died on multiple occasions.

He almost doesn't recognize her, and everything is so different. When she first defected, he used to dream about confronting her, about chasing her down and demanding answers. When the truth was revealed and he abandoned Kiri as well, he dreamt of creating a safe place for his unit. Of becoming strong enough that no village or enemy would ever think of crossing him or his, and then leading them home to help create a world of truth.

Now he's finally on the path of finalizing that dream. It's not going like he thought it would, and there's a lot of work yet to be done, but it's actually happening. He's getting his chance to make things right, to be the leader he should have been. It will take a while to un-teach her all the treachery she has learned, but when he does, she'll finally see the light. She'll understand that the Akatsuki is a force of good, and she'll work for the same dream as him.

Once they collect all the Bijuu, they will be the strongest force on earth. No one will dare stand against their might, because ninja respect strength. There will be no more borders, and no more

daimyo and Kage. There will only be one people and one nation, and the Akatsuki will enforce order and honesty in the new world. It will take their whole lives, and they might not ever see the end result, but it's something he's willing to dedicate everything to. It's something worth the pain and struggle.

The wind whips up again, and the needle comes free from her skin. A bead of red slips out and trails down her arm, and he watches it paint a path downward until his partner wipes it away with a thoughtless swipe of gauze.

"He should be here soon," Itachi murmurs, capping the empty syringe and stowing it away inside his cloak. No trail left behind, and no scent to pick up on. They are too practiced for that sort of behavior.

"I know," Kisame mutters, his fingers resting on the pulse point of her neck. It drums against his fingertip rhythmically, and combined with her breath ghosting against the skin of his forearm, it assures him she is simply in a dreamless sleep.

Itachi gives him a flat look, because what he was attempting to do was insinuate that the swordsman should perhaps keep a lookout for their guest. It's not like Itachi has the eyesight for it any longer, and it's always fairly hard to sense when Zetsu is coming.

Yet the subtle suggestion goes completely ignored, because Kisame seems fairly preoccupied by assuring himself that this is, indeed, reality. Itachi isn't sure how much longer the man can look around the world with that dreamy, contemplative expression, but he wishes he would stop. It's vaguely unsettling to witness.

The two criminals do not have to wait long for their contact to arrive. Zetsu appears by the treeline with a small, near-insignificant spark of chakra that catches both of their attention, emerging out of the tree bark like he is climbing from a pool of water. The grin stretching across his face is almost obnoxious with how much amusement it holds.

"**I s e e y o u g u y s f i n a l l y g o t h e r**," both of his sides chorus together, stepping out onto the grass.

Kisame and Itachi don't answer as Zetsu approaches, bronze eyes peering around the grassy glade. The dual colors of his skin look sickly and washed out in the light of the overcast skies, and Kisame scowls when he glides close enough to lean over the woman in his arms.

" **She better be worth all this damn trouble**," Black Zetsu grumbles. " **Her chakra is repulsive** ." He studies her for a moment more in silence, squinting his eyes and making a disgruntled face. "Huh, I thought she'd be more impressive. Looks like a farmer I ate once," White Zetsu mumbles.

"Zetsu," Itachi interjects before the two sides can really get started. The last thing they need to do is wait around in the open. That's just begging for attack.

The plant man makes an irritated 'tsk' noise with his mouth and gets to work. Under the watchful eye of the retrieval team he scans the captive with impartial, mildly curious eyes, occasionally running his hands over a scar thoughtfully, seemingly searching for something. His hands brush pant legs and shirt hems out of the way, ignorant or uncaring about propriety.

The examination proceeds to annoy Kisame significantly, and while he acknowledges that it is necessary, there really is no need for it to take so long.

His patience snaps when Zetsu brushes along the bottom of her ribs yet again, expression blank. "Well?" he growls.

"No seals," the white side reports. "No trackers but my own. No long-term ninjutsu or genjutsu. No hidden alterations to her body. A bunch of old injuries, mostly, but other than that, she's clear to pass into base."

Itachi nods in acknowledgment of the diagnosis, and Kisame is already beginning to stand again, carrying his sword and the prisoner like they weigh no more than a few groceries.

"We have a tail," Kisame informs Zetsu, and he pulls an annoyed face at this intel. Or, half an annoyed face. The black side of his body makes noise, but Itachi hasn't seen it make any expressions, or do anything at all, really. He assumes that the black side is the source of the secondary voice, though. At least, he hopes it is.

Upon reflection, Itachi has decided this line of thought does him no good in the long run. He will abide by his preconceived notions of Zetsu. Any further investigation may turn out to have unwanted consequences, and he honestly does not wish to know better.

"I figured. Your little swordsman friend is off limits for the kill," the white side gripes. **"Anyone else is fair game though,"** the black side says with dark anticipation.

"You got it. Let the swordsman through, keep anyone else back. We'll meet you back at base," Kisame answers, rolling his neck. It cracks in several places, and he lets out a sigh of contentment. Almost immediately, Itachi is by his side, and the two take off, flickering before disappearing completely. The grass around where they stood ripples in the wake of their departure, and Zetsu holds his scowl for a second. It melts into a sharp-toothed grin when he senses that they have well and truly set off, leaving him behind.

"*Let the swordsman through, keep anyone else back,*" White Zetsu mocks, making his voice into a high falsetto. He gestures flippantly with his hand at their backs. "Who does he think he is?"

Black Zetsu doesn't answer, but then again, it doesn't really have to. They both know that they're going to put the oncoming group off the trail in their own way, and that the blue man is deluded if he thinks it's going to work out the way he wants. There really isn't room for a coherent and dangerous unit inside the Akatsuki, at least, not in Zetsu's opinion. The woman will be enough hassle as it is, but

removing her from Konoha is a nice way of setting off a bomb that will divide the masses, not to mention, she's a meal ticket to a jinchuuriki buffet if they work it right.

"Whatever. At least we get to do something interesting today," White Zetsu grumbles, messing up his green hair. He still doesn't understand why he was created to have hair. It's not like he needs it, or it has any function at all. But he supposes that it's not his place to question.

No, it's his place to sabotage.

The first time Kakashi met her, the sun was shining. It makes a twisted kind of sense that it is the dead of night when she is taken.

He's awake from the moment the ANBU begin to flare their chakra in emergency code, already donning his gear in preparation. He latches his pouches into place with the sinking feeling of dread in his gut, and when a masked figure alights upon his windowsill and informs him that he will be tracking a missing person on a team with Tenzō and the Kiri delegate, that dread churns and becomes despair.

He takes the piece of silk robe offered to him, and he clutches to it like a drowning man clings to a piece of driftwood. Wordlessly, he joins the assembled team, and they set off without noise or talk. There is only silence, and the cacophonous noise of his own thoughts.

Like an echo, he hears her laugh, feels the brush of her hand against his, and wonders why he can't seem to hold onto the things he cares the most about. Ponders why, when everything seems to be hard, life shows him that it can always be harder.

At this point, Kakashi feels like the only thing keeping him moving is his training.

The trees pass by him in a blur, and he feels numb inside. The greenery and lush forest of Konoha have long since given way to the strange evergreen and grassland of western Fire Country, and the bright blue skies have turned a murky, monotone gray that threatens rain. The thought fills him with a distant sense of desperation, because the scent on the ground is already incredibly faint, especially for being lain just a few hours prior, and he doesn't think he'll be able to navigate it in a deluge.

He clutches the fabric in his hand with muted misery even though he really doesn't need a memory refresher for this. He knows her scent like the back of his hand at this point, and even then, he is hard pressed to pick it out. The opposing team is good, very good, and that does not bode well for the trio.

Why does everything always have to go wrong? he wonders beneath his numbness.

His conditioning kicks in yet again, and he compartmentalizes. Logically, he knows there have been worse situations than this. Losing his father, for one, and then the loss of his team. He counts Ryuishi's most recent brush with death as well, because it was traumatising to the extreme. In comparison, a kidnapping situation involving an enemy force that most likely wants her alive seems to pale. But it's simply the most recent happening in a long string of events that have been wearing at him for a long time.

He also knows that many would widely consider him not only a success, but a figure to look up to. He doesn't feel like that, though. He feels like he only just got back to a good place, like he just started climbing. It was less than a month ago that Ryuishi forgave him and took his hand, and he's already failed. The fingers that had intertwined with his own were not there, and the woman herself was torn away by something he couldn't protect her from.

The weight of it burdens him, because it was not long ago at all that he walked into the ambassador lodging and saw her there, healthy and whole, dressed better than he ever seen her. He remembers

thinking that she looked like an actual lady, and being surprised to remember that she was a woman and not a genderless ninja from parts unknown.

He had made a promise that day, not formally, and not out loud. He had sat and he had heard her story in full for the first time, and he said he wouldn't let it happen again. He said that he wouldn't allow any more traumatic things to occur, and he lied.

The thought exhausts him, and he isn't sad, but he's... There's just been too much lately. Too much of everything, and he isn't sure how to deal with it. All he is sure of is that he has a three man cell of close to mid-ranged jounin rank fighters with him. He has one with front line combat experience, and both him and Tenzō have years in sabotage and assassination. All of them have spent time in special ops, and all of them are upset.

In Zabuza's case, upset is a term that doesn't really fit right, though. The man is absolutely livid, and his chakra roils over his body like a second skin, hovering just above the first. Kakashi can feel the killer intent radiating off of him, and with good reason. He has no idea what sort of relationship the Kaijuu had, but to have a commander of the unit do something like this... It would be like if Minato had gone rouge and taken Rin or Obito. Worse, it would be like if Obito had taken Rin and left him behind.

Kakashi hopes that he can hold his composure half as well as the blank-faced man in front of him.

What he doesn't see is the undercurrent beneath the stoic mask. The fury that lashes out and fills him up from the bottom of his feet to the top of his head. Anger at his commander, the man who was like his family, for stealing her when he should have just come back home. Rage at the organization that has some unsaid purpose for her, like she is a thing to be used. Hatred for the fact that she can never just sit still and be safe, that she finds herself in these situations all the time.

When he gets her back, Zabuza is not letting her out of his grip. He doesn't care about the political connotations or any of her other whining, he's going to grab her and not let go. He won't lose her, not now, not ever, not even to a fellow swordsman.

The thought of Kisame spikes his ire even higher, because he left them for years, became part of the organization that almost killed her. Then he shows up out of nowhere like some sort of coward, and steals away in the dead of night without a proper confrontation. He didn't have enough balls to call them out and fight about it like a real man would, no. The only thing in that clearing was one of his teeth, and Zabuza takes a vicious pride in the fact that she got at least one good hit in. The bastard deserves more, especially after this latest stunt.

Zabuza makes a promise, then and there. He will ensure that every injury she gains will leave a twin on his commander, even if he has to do it with his own two hands. He's going to start with the kidnapping and return the favor, as it were. He's going to kick the absolute hell out of the man, then abduct him from his people and see how he likes it.

He's so committed to the plan that when the torso of a plant... person... thing emerges from one of the branches like an impromptu bean sprout, he doesn't even stop. He sees red clouds against black fabric, unhooks Kubikiribōchō from his back, and swings as hard as he can at the closed plant apparatus. It sinks in with a satisfying squelch that soothes something inside of him.

Only, instead of a crimson river of fluid bleeding out from it, a white goo oozes down his blade for a moment, and the strange plant-like growth encasing the being in front of him opens up to reveal an individual who doesn't look quite as dead as Zabuza wants them to be.

"Oh, what-not even a hello?" it warbles out, and he notices the men behind him come to a stop. He growls, because there isn't time for stopping, they have to *move* .

He lashes out with his foot, but the thing catches it with a hand so black, the skin could be made from ink. Fingers close around his sandal and squeeze, attempting to apply a crushing amount of force. Zabuzza has no choice but to withdraw his sword and yank his limb back, flipping off of the branch to land in between the other two ninja.

" **Rude**," another voice sighs from the same body, and the white side cackles as it reforms. Pasty white flesh moves like putty, smoothing over the area that was cut clean through. His irritation spikes again, because he doesn't understand why none of these cloaked bastards will die like they're supposed to. First the crazy scythe man, and then the Waterfall missing-nin who looked suspiciously similar to Ryuishi, and now this... thing.

The monstrosity's face is bisected by color. Though the eyes are different shapes, they burn the same dulled bronze hue, and there is something decidedly playful about the look that he doesn't like. This isn't the time for games.

"You Mist-nin are all alike. All violence, no talk," the first voice chides, resonating oddly in his eardrums. It sounds like it's caught inside a malfunctioning radio unit, and it grates on his nerves.

"All obstacles are to be eliminated," he informs it dispassionately. "Move or die."

The white side cackles gleefully. "I don't think it's going to work like that. I think that you three are going to turn around, or somebody else is going to die."

Zabuzza stops listening, because talk is cheap, and he moves forward to make good on his threat. He readies his blade for a decapitating blow, but a hand on his shoulder makes him stop. Literally, the grip forces him to either stop or begin dragging the person with him.

He slides his gaze over to Hatake, furious. If he tries to stop Zabuzza from getting to her, he'll cut him down as well.

"What do you mean by someone else?" Hatake asks the figure, and this is why he hates working with Leaf-nin. They love to just talk talk, all the damn time.

"The Rakki Ryuu is useful to us alive right now," the white half states warningly. " **But make it more effort than she's worth, and she'll be more useful dead,** " the black side finishes tonelessly.

Zabuza stops straining against the hold, and he feels the other man's fingers dig into his skin. He's not upset about that, no. That he understands.

"You had your time, and now it's up. One of ours wants some time, and he is allowed it because she could prove beneficial," it goes on to explain, gesturing dramatically with it's hand. "So big blue gets his toy, and she gets to live. The only ones who are upset are the people who had their fun cut a little bit short, but everybody gets to keep breathing."

The half-smile slips off its face, and the mirth leaves the creature's expression. Its eyes harden and it leaks killer intent into the air, letting its seriousness be known. Its arm falls down to land on the side of the plant encasing it as it leans forward, fingers clawed against the succulent greenery.

"Keep chasing after them though, keep pushing us, and things become a little more complicated. We can exist without her, and she serves a purpose in death as well as in life. We can use either, really," it assures the men.

"He wouldn't let you," Zabuza says, because he has to believe that in the end, his commander wouldn't do that. That somewhere the idiot realizes the unit is strongest together.

"Maybe he would let it happen, maybe he would try to stop us," it says carelessly. "But he's not the one giving out orders, **and he can't watch her all the time.** "

He feels ice in his veins, replacing the magma that ran through them just moments before. He feels conflicted for the first time in this search, because there is always a way to get things, always a way to outmaneuver an opponent.

But this isn't a fight. This is people stuff. This is feelings and emotions and bonds mixed with politics and war. This is what she was there to deal with, her area of expertise, and now she's not here. Now she's with his brother in arms who is no longer his brother but also still kind of is, and she's safe with him, but also not safe.

Zabuza doesn't know what to believe. He feels like he's going crazy.

"Allow us regular checks on her person and we will take the deal back to the Kage," Hatake attempts to bargain.

"No deal," the creature sing-songs. "This isn't a negotiation, little leaf, but because we're nice, we'll cut you some slack. Once in awhile, maybe we'll drop by with something you know will be hers. Her chakra's pretty distinctive, and corpses don't make chakra.

Hatake narrows his eyes, and Zabuza feels the ire inside him grow. That's not a deal, that's a long-lived threat. A constant reminder that her life is in somebody else's hands. It's all a game to this thing.

"It's not going to go as you plan," Tenzō says stonily, and the creature regards his form curiously for a moment. It tilts its head to the side in a sick imitation of a confused child.

"You Leaf-nin sure do talk a lot. I actually prefer the Mist guy to this. At least he's pretty upfront and to the point," it comments idly.

Tenzo doesn't answer it, because he knows that they are trapped. They will not move forward with such a risk, and they must accept what it gives them. However, he also knows that if anyone can derail a well-laid scheme or plan, it's going to be Watanabe. The last place she should be is close at hand if you want your plots to succeed.

It seems to regain its composure after a moment of thought, writing the meeting off as finished.

"Well, we have places to be. We've stalled long enough the the trail's gone cold anyway, so just remember the rules, kids," it says with a smile, melting back into the tree. Zabuza makes an aborted movement forward, instinctively going to cut it down with a growl in his throat, but Kakashi holds him back by his shoulder, and Tenzo ducks around to assist in subduing him as well. Acting out now is not going to help, no matter how much they want the thing dead. Especially after it's parting words:

" Back off, or what you'll get will be her severed head ."

Misaki isn't originally from the Land of Fire.

Her grandmother is, though, one of the original lines that sprang forth when the village was founded. Longer than that, probably, but Misaki wasn't born in Konoha, or anywhere near the the forested, green place she has come to love. No, Misaki was born on a little island far away, a spot of land that rode the border between Wave and Water.

Her mother was a courtesan. Not a sex worker, per se, but a lowborn bed partner of a minor noble by choice. Misaki knows it was a smart choice on her mother's part, because though she would never be anything but a bastard and a girl, she was allowed education and had a happy enough childhood where she was provided not only shelter, food, and water, but affection and love as well. She trained in the same arts her mother did, knew how to recite poetry and sit in halls and gossip, knew her numbers and how to play hostess, but Misaki owes her life to the Rakki Ryuu.

If it wasn't for her mother's old courtesan friends coming through and warning them, Misaki would have been trapped in the purges along with everybody else in Water Country. If it wasn't for her emissaries and quick action, she would have never made it back to her

ancestral home, and if it wasn't for her dedication, Misaki would have ended up purposeless or dead.

The Rakki Ryuu gave Misaki things nobody can ever take away. When the world spat upon women of her profession and looked down upon them, the Rakki Ryuu told them that a choice freely made was to be respected. When her own mother told her that she needed to be married to succeed, the Rakki Ryuu told her that her life was her own, and that she need not be married to fulfill her purpose. She said that they were people when they had been told for so long that they were commodities, and when Misaki felt useless and lost, the Rakki Ryuu came and delivered her.

In another world, she may have grown and followed the same path as her mother, begetting the child of her partner and living off her beauty, and then later, off their benevolence. Now, she has a life she has crafted with her own two hands, something she earned by the sweat of her brow and the skill of her tongue.

(In more ways than one, really.)

She is strong, she is important, and she is loved. She is loyal to the Rakki Ryuu, and will be for the rest of her life. She was chosen by her Lady herself. She was gifted with friends and experiences, and eventually, a family that she never thought she would have.

Which is why she waits for her Lady when she wakes up alone in their joined chambers. It's why she worries when her Lady does not show, and why she grows so very anxious when she hears that neither Momochi-san nor Hatake-san have been seen.

It's why she panics when she spies Haku lingering in the hall outside his room, clutching a certain piece of jewelry like it is a lifeline.

Misaki is not a ninja. Misaki has no training in espionage and violence. She has court etiquette and secrets of information passing that her mother taught her. She has no lifeline and she has no repression, and she is scared and heartbroken, because that is...

that is a crown in that boy's hands. A crown made of bone and hand-carved beads, a symbol of a position, something that her Lady would not just lose. It is a sign that everything has gone suddenly and horribly wrong.

So, understandably dismayed and more than a little frightened, she goes to do what she was tasked with doing many years ago. She is alone and defenseless in a building full of people who may have had something to do with her lady's disappearance, and she needs to sound the alarm.

With her shaking hands hidden inside her kimono sleeves, and her imagination conjuring terrible scenarios, she begins to leave the grounds. She smiles and says she is going out to pick up some tea, even though her heart is fluttering with fear and she feels like crying.

If her lady is still out there, she will halt the course of things. If not... if not, then-

Her breath hitches, and she continues on toward the western districts. Today is a Tuesday of the second week of the month, so what she seeks will be waiting in the canal near the gambling houses. If she can just get there, she can get the news to spread. She can set things in order, and then-

Her breathing is sharp and quick, and she focuses on the goal, clinging tightly to it. Her eyes sting and it's hard to think, but she keeps going. She hopes she is being hasty, prays that she is wrong, but the hairpin in the hands of that boy in particular. The disappearance of so many so close to her-

She makes it to the spot, and somehow, nobody stops her. With a sigh of relief, she seats herself on a creaky bench, pretending to be weary and worn. The shade of a nearby tree hangs over her, and for a moment she listens. Her fingers pat out a peculiar pattern on the worn wooden surface of the planks, and above her, a bird twitters out a half remembered song.

She opens her mouth and copies the notes, and the tree branches ruffle as the bird jumps down to listen closer. This time, the string of notes changes, and though her voice warbles, the creature seems interested. It hops down to the bench beside her, and she turns to it. The glistening black and gleaming white feathers ruffle as it cranes its head to peer at her through one perfectly rounded eye.

She opens her mouth to whisper to it, but something whizzes through the air. It leaps off the bench with a squawk of surprise and disappears into the tree leaves. If someone with a keen eye was watching, they would see it flutter off through the other side, climb high into the air, and dissipate in a cloud of smoke.

Misaki cannot see that, though. Few could, even if they tried. All she can do is stare at the empty spot in front of her, where a blade lodges inside the wood.

"Magpie summons. Clever," a deep baritone voice remarks, and she squeezes her eyes shut. How did they get here? Since when were they following her?

"I can only assume that Kagami used more than one species in her network," rasps a familiar tone, a dry hiss that Misaki once trusted and now despairs at hearing. He could be part of it. They all could be. In the end, it doesn't matter, though. Time will give them all away if she is truly gone.

"Misaki," that sibilant tone croons. "I knew she would trust you. So special, chosen by her own hand to watch over this city."

She swallows, but doesn't answer. She doesn't know if she can, because her throat has gone dry and she is both horrified and dismayed.

"She granted you safe passage into Otokakure, gifted you the honor of watching over her most carefully laid schemes. What else did she trust you with, I wonder?" he continues, and she can feel him coming

closer. Can feel his presence like a tangible thing as he stands tall above, blocking out the sun with his form.

"Orochimaru, you're terrifying the woman," comes a brusque, female voice.

"I don't believe it matters either way," he says idly, and she feels cold fingers underneath her chin. For a moment, her body automatically associates those hands with comfort, because her lady also felt so chill. She allows them to guide her jaw for a just a second before her mind overrides her instinct and freezes, her eyes flashing open.

She sees gold. Gold eyes that burn like cold fire, lined with the same purple that the sky turns at twilight.

"Come now, Misaki, you can confide in me. I am her partner, after all," he hisses. She knows his hands can carve the earth and tear apart the forest. She has seen ninja, has watched them run across rooftops and leap through the sky. More than that, she has seen them carry loads that horses would balk at, and she has witnessed them spar.

He is said to be one of the best. His fingers alone could crush her jaw like glass, and yet they are deceptively gentle. Just a hint of the power that lies beneath. She fears him, truly and greatly, but she also knows that her heart is not his to command.

"Where is the Odayaka Oni?" she whispers, and his face stills. For a moment, there is silence, and then a flicker of something that reaches down her throat and steals her breath away. She trembles, choking on nothing, and her heart feels like it's being dragged out of her mouth. She faces her death with wide, scarred eyes.

Then it cuts out, and the Otokage in front of her smiles comfortingly, even though she has coughed up saliva on his skin and is shaking like a leaf.

"Orochimaru, cut it out," the other male voice says, and the Otokage releases his grasp on her chin. His fingers withdraw slowly, but for a moment, she can feel the ghost of them lingering. Automatically, she hides her face in her hands, and her fingertips run across moisture. She began crying at some point, but she remains unashamed. She didn't break. She's scared and alone and her next chance to make contact comes tomorrow at best, but she didn't spill anything. She stuck to the script she was given.

She is worthy. She is loyal. The Rakki Ryuu would be proud.

"You are mistaken if you believe you can command me, Jiraiya," the Otokage snaps, and she does not see the way the white-haired man flinches and readies himself for a fight, his eyes darkening with ill intent.

"Then why did you stop?" the other man fires back.

"Because she already gave us an answer," the female voice says, and Misaki peeks through her fingers to get a glimpse of the speaker. Even through her terror, she notes that the woman would have made a good prostitute. Not the biggest pair she has seen, but admirable nonetheless.

"She'll talk to the Swordsman, and that's it. Any more pushing and it becomes an actual interrogation on foreign grounds for the two of them, and we're trying to not make this messy," Tsunade says plainly.

"If that wasn't a field interrogation, I don't know what is. He used killer intent on a civilian," Jiraiya grouches.

"The laws of our countries are different. I assure you that tempers have grown heated in the debate rooms of our college many times," Orochimaru says flippantly, and Misaki knows he is right. However, his was on another level completely. She's going to have nightmares for weeks.

"That doesn't make it right," the other man grumbles, and Otokage sneers at him.

"Save your sickening moral duplicity for another day," he rasps. "I have seen you-

"-in broad daylight, against a civilian woman! She has no tr-

"ENOUGH," Tsunade commands, and the two still, one more dignified than the other. Misaki even manages to stop crying at the command, lightly dabbing her face with her sleeve. Rubbing will only serve to irritate the area further, and she already knows she must look a fright. Her eyewear is waterproof, of course, but that doesn't mean it hasn't smudged something awful.

"Misaki-san, we can get you an audience with Momochi-san when he returns. Hopefully by then, this will all be pointless anyway. However, Orochimaru said you were acting jumpy and he wasn't wrong," Tsunade says, crossing her arms under her ample bosom. She doesn't know who Misaki was trying to contact or why, but she knows that it's no longer an issue for now. The handmaiden will remain under watch by one of them at all times, whether she knows it or not. Orochimaru wasn't wrong when he said what he did. She's a trusted confidante of the missing leader, and she has been for a long time. She is trusted enough that the Watanabe girl felt secure enough to leave a child she loved in her care. If there was post-mortem plans, or an information nerve center for the Mumei, she would be at the center of it.

Misaki breathes out a shaky sigh, because there is no shame in this. The Sannin will watch her, and she may not be able to contact the Mumei directly, but she can speak with the Odayaka Oni. In time, the others will know by her silence anyway, because they can kill her, but you can never kill an idea. Not when so many believe in it, and not when it has spread as far as hers has.

There is hope yet, she thinks, and the fear in her chest loosens just a bit. The Odayaka Oni is away, and she can read between the lines.

He would not let her be betrayed, let her be hurt. He is powerful and strong, and the Rakki Ryuu trusts him above almost all others.

(The hope makes the heartbreak all the more acute when the time comes to speak with the swordsman, and the Rakki Ryuu is nowhere to be seen.)

An: Surprise double update second week in a row, because my Beta likes to spoil you guys. Enbi loves you.

Seriously though, the POV shifts. I'm sorry.

In Which Old Favors Come In Handy

I do not own Naruto.

A long time ago in Kiri, there was a unit.

(This was special, because Kiri didn't have set units. Kiri had soldiers mashed together without groups or order. Kiri used to be every man, woman, and child for themselves.)

When the world was chaos and blood, when the skies burned red and the earth beneath their feet trembled, they existed, just the three of them. There was a harmony there in that violence, an understanding that went deeper than words and fists, something that defined them.

(She was the Ningyo, and the Ningyo was a Kaijuu. She belonged to them.)

War was where they grew, and though they didn't have much, they had each other. When reality slipped sideways and turned inside out, and when blankets of fog kept everything obscured and unsure, the Kaijuu made sense. In the dark, frozen nights when frost crept into limbs and terror crawled into hearts, the Kaijuu kept them both at bay. When it seemed like there was only ever death and struggle, the Kaijuu reminded each other that there was light and laughter.

(She loved them.)

A long time ago in Kiri, there was a unit.

(But that was then, and thirteen years is a lot of time for things to change.)

Ryuishi wakes up, and the first thing she notices is the smell. It's petrichor and musk mixed with the scent of clean linens brought in just a little too early. Still damp, and just on the off side of mildew.

The second thing she notices is the foreign feel of the sheets against her skin. It's not the silky covers of the futon she had used in Konoha, or the thick, plush blankets of her own bed. It's smooth, a good thread count that snags almost imperceptibly on her rough, callused hands. The weight of the blankets is a little too light, and she's cold in the bedding. There is no familiar form beside her to roll near for comfort, no thick comforter to add on top. Just the blankets and her frozen feet and fingers.

She opens her eyes slowly, and it takes a couple blinks to really get them to focus. Above her is an unfamiliar ceiling made from flat grey stone, and the light of the day sends a dull throb through her head. There is a knot she can feel against the pillows, tender and swollen, but manageable. For some reason her hair is loose, and it smells like her shampoo, musky and fragrant.

Her mind is in that quiet state of alertness, no thoughts running through it at all. In this moment, she simply is settling back into existence, readying herself to be part of the waking world. The stillness and quiet that surrounds her in this place is helpful for that. There's a sense of tranquility she can't name, and at the moment she doesn't bother to try.

She blinks again, turning to lie on her side, and the soft sounds of blankets scraping together fills her ears. The new angle allows her to look down her own body to the foot of the bed. There, sitting patiently in a chair at the foot of the bed, is Kisame.

Her brain doesn't really compute it at first. She stares blankly ahead while the neurons fire and synapses go wild.

A second passes. Another blink.

Ryuishi is fully awake in seconds, throwing herself up and forward with a snarl. Rage fills her at the sight of those reflective eyes, and she feels betrayal course through her entire body like white hot violence. In that moment, she hates him, she hates his stupid face and all the years she pined. She hates the wasted time and effort, and she hates that *it hurts so bad* .

She reaches out with her fist to nail him across the jaw again before something yanks her wrist back with a clink.

She freezes again, her eyes sliding to where her fist is held behind, taking in the silver manacle around her wrist. It's incomprehensible to her for a moment, and her mouth opens at the implications of the chains.

Kisame sits in his seat, his elbows resting on his knees and his fingers steeped together, and he watches her. He hasn't moved, and doesn't look surprised in the least. She turns back to stare wordlessly at him.

Her brain isn't working right, and all she can think is that he got big. Real big. That same color of blue-grey that haunted her fills her with so much hurt and anger it makes her ears ring, and those reflective eyes that always unsettled her sit like targets on his face. His cheekbones are more prominent than ever, and his jaw line has finally emerged after all this time. He's still built like a brick shit house, all muscle and strength, but it isn't like it's supposed to be. Nothing is as it's supposed to be.

"I didn't want to add the chains," he says in a low voice. "But I see now that they really are necessary."

"Let me go," she says, and she realizes she's shaking. The links clink together, alerting her to this fact. She's alone in some foreign place, her romanticized dreams for the future sinking like the fucking titanic. She has no weapon on her, no trick up her sleeve, and the man she always hoped would come back home has dragged her away from everything she built.

"No," he says.

"I trusted you," she whispers.

This time he moves, standing up silently. He is huge now, a towering giant lit by the dim grey light of the room. He doesn't loom like Orochimaru does, and he doesn't lurk like Kakashi. He is a fact, undeniable and unignorable.

"No," he says again. "You never trusted anyone. That's part of the problem, and it's something I'm going to fix."

"Fix?" she hisses. " *Fix* ?"

"How long have you been running around like this?" he asks, ignoring her words. He steps closer, and she wants to ruin him in that moment. Wants to wreck him like he has wrecked her.

"How many truths have you hidden or ignored? I bet you don't even don't even know. When you left, you were lost, you couldn't keep track of the lies anymore, and I don't think that's changed. If anything, it's gotten worse," he tells her, and she doesn't get it. It's all nonsense to her, just words. She's seething, seeing nothing but red, straining against the cuffs. It doesn't even occur to her to listen, because she is *infuriated* .

She jams her thumbs into her palms, using the metal of her shackles to dislocate them with a sickening crack that barely registers as painful anymore. Her hands slide out of the metal, and she is free to lunge forward at him, baring her teeth like an animal, running on instinct. Her chakra surges, smothering and dense. It roars to life with her anger.

For a split second he looks surprised, but it's gone in a flash. There is only grim determination on his face when she swings her elbow out like a bludgeon, catching him in the torso.

He grunts, but he's quick to catch her arms in his hands while her feet kick at the blankets, desperate to untangle themselves so she can squeeze the breath out of him. She wants to lift her feet high enough to kick the stupid right out of him.

But Kisame is strong. Ridiculously strong, and all that muscle isn't for show. He struggles for it, grunting as he fights to keep her forehead away from his so she can't headbutt him, and keep her teeth out of range his neck. He throws his weight forward, and she careens backward, struggling to maim him.

The mattress greets her back once more, and she snarls as he pins her legs beneath his weight. Her hips buck upwards to throw him off, and he jolts, but he doesn't fall. He just grits his teeth and wrestles her arms down.

"HOW *DARE* YOU!" she screeches. "I GAVE YOU A CHOICE! YOU COULD HAVE COME BACK, WE COULD HAVE BEEN A UNIT AGAIN!"

Kisame doesn't answer, but inside his mind he knows this to be untrue. The time they spent as a unit was a facade. The camaraderie they had was real, and so was the affection, but the whole time she was with them, she was lying. She never trusted them enough to tell the truth about what she had been through, never thought to let them in on her secrets. She was double dealing with Orochimaru and planning the downfall of their city while she risked her life for them on the battlefield.

He has no doubt she cares, that she loved them, but it was unhealthy. What she did was fundamentally screwed up, and he isn't going to let it happen again. This time, she can lie all she wants, but he's going to be the leader he should have been back then. He's going to sort out the truth from the lies, because not even a liar can lie all the time.

"YOU'VE RUINED EVERYTHING!" she shrieks. She lets out a wordless cry of fury, stretching her neck forward as far as possible,

and her jaw snaps just short of the skin of his shoulder.

"You have a direct reason to be here," he tells her in a calm voice. He expected this, the lashing out, the anger. It doesn't make it any easier, but it comes as no surprise. "You built yourself up, hoarded power made from money and secrets. You dug your nose into everybody's darkest places, consorted with criminals and traitors of the worst sort. You manipulated and you lied, used people like pieces in some sort of game."

She cries out again, writhing like a thing possessed. Her spine twists unnaturally as she contorts, trying to free her limbs from his hold. Long black hair tangles beneath her head, and he is surprised at the raw strength she has. He has to struggle to keep her down, and he is forced to release his own chakra in response to hers. The feeling of it against his senses is making him wonder how he could have ever missed the glaring deformity in it.

"You played so many roles. Kunoichi, Ningyo, Rakki Ryuu, trader, stranger, loved one... You probably made even more masks living with that snake, but now you're done. Now you learn a different way," he tells her sternly.

Her head slams back down on the pillows and she shakes it from side to side, her eyes squeezed shut. It's like she's trying to block him out completely, block out everything that's happening.

"I'll show you, like I should have done a long time ago. One step at a time," he continues, quieter now. Less stern, more tempting. "It will be like learning water jutsu all over again. Do you remember how you didn't want to? How we had to drag you from your bed out to the lake and force you every step of the way?"

She slows in her thrashing, her chest heaving as she huffs out breaths through her nose. Her eyes are still stubbornly squeezed shut, and the moment he feins letting go, her arm raises a few millimeters to swing on him. He clamps back down feeling no surprise, and she starts bucking again.

"Then those techniques became second nature, even though you fought them so hard at first," he grinds out, straining to subdue her.

She snarls and spits, fighting against him, and he waits it out. At one point she manages to pull her leg free, and he has to scramble upwards to straddle her stomach before she can wedge it between them. Her knee still slams against his back hard, and he quits talking at that point, saving his energy to wrestle her.

Kisame loses track of time. As much as he enjoys a fight and craves the heat of battle, this conflict does not please him. He's not happy to have to grapple with her to keep her still, to force her to listen.

Eventually she does wear herself out, though. He can feel it when her arms begin to tremble in their efforts, shivering against his palms. Her breathing comes hard and heavy through her mouth, and when she opens her eyes, the fire has begun to fade into something that makes his gut churn. Her chakra stops roaring in his ears, and he realizes he can only describe her expression as devastated.

Her constant swallowing puts him ill at ease, as does the sound of her shaking breaths. She tries to fight it and compose herself, but the tears gathering in the corner of her eyes give her away.

Her hands stop curling into fists and she's not leaning in to tear at his flesh with her teeth, but to hide her face in the nearest available surface.

He still doesn't trust that she won't change her mind, and he moves her arms in between them, trapping them there. His hands now free, he threads the fingers of one of them in the hair near the base of her skull, so if she bites down he can pull her back. The other, he wraps around her back.

His old unit member goes forward until her face is pressed somewhere between his collarbone and pectoral, and her body shakes with the force of her silent sobs. He feels the fabric of his shirt get covered in moisture, a mixture of tears, mucus, and saliva.

"I believed in you," she chokes out, and her husky voice is ruined. Rough and raw from the shouting and crying. He feels the wet, hot rush of her breath through his clothes, and honestly it's a little gross.

He sighs, rubbing a circle on her spine with his thumb.

"I w-waited years for you," she blubbers. "You never came. N-Now you're g-going to *use* me."

This statement actually stings, because he knows he shouldn't have waited. By this point it they had been separated for too long and there was a good chance she wouldn't have remembered him. But she does, and even though so much has happened, she's here now.

"I'm sorry I made you wait," he says, and he means it.

She huffs out a bitter laugh, but after a few seconds it turns into a keen that she smothers in his pectoral. He feels her hands tighten into claws, but she can't get a grip because of the strange angle.

"It's gonna be fine. You'll see," he assures her, and she hiccups against him, wordless in her grief.

It's just the two of them in that moment, cast in the soft grey light of the building, surrounded by an empty room and a tangle of bedding. The smell of petrichor and seawater mingle together while her cool hands seep heat from his body, and there are no sounds but the quiet gasps she makes as she tries to smother down her sorrow.

The door to the side opens slowly, and Kisame turns to glare at whoever is intruding upon the hard-won peace that he's wrested for the moment. However, his eyes soften when he sees Itachi standing in the entry way. The boy wouldn't bother him unless it's something good.

"Hidan felt the chakra surge. He's on his way," the Uchiha warns him, and Kisame bites off a curse. The woman next to him shudders,

choking on her tears, and he remembers that the white haired idiot is one of the two that dragged her so close to death's door.

"I'll take care of him," Kisame answers, slowly untangling himself, more determined than before. "Will you...?"

Itachi nods, approaching the bed. He eyes the empty chains dispassionately before catching sight of the swollen skin around her thumb's metacarpal joints. The clues come together, and he gently takes hold of her wrists, his pale white skin standing out against the bronze. Her limbs lie heavy in his hands, and when he tries to look in her eyes, he notices she's looking downward, her hair hiding her face like a curtain.

His partner makes his way over to his cloak and weapon, and before it is covered, he spots the wet stain left on the man's shirt. More pieces begin to slot together, and Itachi suddenly feels incredibly uncomfortable for interrupting. He doesn't let it show, but the idea of the Rakki Ryuu crying is deeply unsettling to him, like watching a friend lose composure for the first time.

Kisame drifts over once more when Samehada is strapped to his back, and Watanabe reveals her face to him, tilting her head to look through her hair. Itachi notes the swollen, red-rimmed eyes, and the cherry hue to her nose with hidden unease.

"Don't worry about that guy, he won't get to you," Itachi sees the man assure her.

Her eyes narrow, and Itachi thinks that it is somewhat impressive that she can manage to be disdainful and cruel with tear stained cheeks and a voice that is thick from a congested nose. Even now droplets gather in her lashes, pushing past her eyes and trailing down her skin.

"You all wear those cloaks," she accuses. "You're all the same to me."

His partner's head snaps back from the force of her words, and for the first time he wears an expression of frustration and hurt in her presence. It's plain to him that Kisame is trying very hard and getting nothing in return, and that she takes spiteful satisfaction in the cutting words.

The man turns to Itachi, acting as if the comment was never spoken. It takes him a moment to compose himself, but in the end, he manages.

"Keep her safe," he commands, his features betraying some of his hurt at her statement. He pivots on his heel before anymore can be said, storming out the door with malicious intent, slamming it closed behind him. The whole time he feels her eyes boring holes in his back.

A heavy silence falls on the two left inside, and Ryuishi clenches her jaw at the turn of events. She just woke up but she's emotionally exhausted inside, and the world is crashing around her ears. She has no goal now. No direction. She's just so fucking sad it actually hurts.

The sound of a meaty click and a jolt of pain that radiates through her arms draws her out of her thoughts. Deceivingly delicate looking hands brush over hers, and once more she feels the pop of her thumb joint sliding into place. She hisses, low and dangerous, turning her hateful eyes onto the boy she once helped.

He's older, and not so lanky and awkward now. It looks like he's put some meat on his bones, his frame sturdy and lithe instead of stretched and thin. In a way, he is beautiful, made of porcelain skin and soulful eyes, his features treading the line between effeminate and masculine in the best possible way. His lashes are longer than hers, and his face more elegant and graceful.

"Will you run?" he asks her.

"I can't outrun you," she admits hollowly, and he nods, retracting his hands from hers. The cool air brushes against her face, and she attempts to snort all the snot in her nose back up, but it doesn't work. Rapidly blinking doesn't stop her tears either.

A beat passes, and she brings her wrists closer to her chest, rubbing at her wrists. Kisame held them like they were nothing, and her ire grows at the thought of how weak she feels. How defenseless. She isn't some helpless maiden or noodle-armed child. She's strong, but these people make her look about as dangerous as a particularly pissed off parakeet.

Ryuishi feels lost in a mire of despair and fury. She hoped for so long, waited for that final person to come home. She should have been happy with what she had, content. She should have worked harder to take down Ame and the Akatsuki, realized that the Kisame she knew died ago instead of pining for a memory. Now she's alone, and there is no Zabuza to wake up to in the morning or Kakashi to speak with at night. There is no Haku with his gentle smile and cutting shade, no Naruto with his bright grins and thirst for life. She should have appreciated it more when she had it.

You couldn't, whispers a traitorous part of her brain. You don't know how to be at peace, you only know how to fight.

You don't know what to do with good things. You're toxic, Jiraiya echoes in her head.

Her face twists into something ugly when she feels her eyes water again, and she struggles to force them back down. She feels disgusting and nauseous, and she kind of wishes she hadn't woken at all.

"I realize that now may not be the opportune time to speak, but I fear it may be one of the only times we have unmonitored," Itachi states monotonously, breaking the silence.

She looks up, confused, because as far she knows, Itachi and her aren't exactly on friendly terms. They did business, and she has a soft spot for kids, but he grew up, and he isn't a child anymore. There is no reason he should want to be with her unmonitored.

"Regretfully, your own actions drew the attention of this organization, particularly your companionship with the jinchuuriki, and your personal past with my partner," Itachi says to her, and her mind spins. Regretfully? Jinchuuriki?

"I, personally, find the idea of war and needless death distasteful. I met someone who once thought the same," he continues nonsensically.

"What?" she croaks, her voice even rougher than usual.

"I like snakes, toad, and slugs, but my favorites happen to be dogs and crows," he says without inflection. He doesn't even blink. His stone-like countenance has always been creepy, but saying such ridiculous things is too much. He's startled the tears into stopping at least, but she needs a fucking dictionary to translate whatever code he's-

Code.

Code.

Her brain does a hard reboot, and the logical pieces of her scramble to wrench the wheel away from her emotions. For a second she's sure there is nothing but her ugly mug scrunched up in confusion as she attempts to work through it all.

Regret. He didn't want to do this, but for some reason or another he had to. He couldn't blatantly defy orders, that would be a death sentence in a gang like this.

Jinchuuriki... she's here because she drew attention to herself by playing with one of kids. Which means they know who one of them

is, but not both, and they don't know where the other ones are, and they are using her mainly for that reason. That's what they will attempt to drag out of her. Not only that, but she's here because of her 'personal past'. She's not just here for business, but personal matters. Kisame must have done something stupid, made some sort of idiotic contract.

He finds war distasteful, of course he does. He's a pacifist, but needless death? What about it? He slaughtered his whole clan, and that's a lot of death, but she wouldn't call it needless. Only it wasn't all of them, was it? No, because when that happened-

Oh. Shit. She's the person he met.

Itachi doesn't like needless death and she helped him because she thought that there was too much of it. That was years ago now, but he remembers and he-holy shit this kid is good. He wants to prevent needless war and death, and he knows what dragging her in will cause.

Alright. He's good, but what about it?

Then a barn. Or like, a fucked up zoo. Snakes, toads, and slugs are obviously the sannin, so he knows about them. Dogs are maybe Kakashi, and crows are Itachi himself, but what does a random grouping of people have to do with things? I mean, the only thing that they have in common is that they... all... use... summons...

That clever little shit, she thinks in awe. She stares at him, flabbergasted by his intelligence. He can use his summons to communicate. She's not cut off completely, and she isn't alone.

Ryuishi throws herself at the teenager, wrapping him up in her arms to hold him close to her. She buries the seed of hope in her chest like a treasured jewel, letting the light suffuse her weary heart. It gives her the strength she needs to keep going for a little bit longer. Just one more step.

He stiffens under her touch, but he doesn't shove her away. He simply holds still while she hugs him, letting her affection seep through his bones.

"The trees have eyes, but sharingan sees all," he murmurs, and she clutches his cloak in understanding. Zetsu will be watching her in the future, but he will know when.

They have to be careful, so incredibly careful. This is the big leagues, and any slip up means not only a slow, painful death, but it means chaos. It means she has to attempt to carefully unravel her deadman's switches as they go off, and some she won't be able to stop at all. It means that she has to trust in other people more than she ever has before.

It's scary, and she doesn't think even a full contingent of jounin-level ANBU could snatch her back now. But though she might not be able to work in person, she has been teaching others how to her entire life.

It means giving up control, and that hurts her. Like pulling a tooth or peeling out her nails, it hurts to think about, but she doesn't have a choice. If she doesn't do it everybody is fucked sideways in the least pleasurable way. Everything will slip and fall, and she wanted there to be more choice involved, more freedom of thought. She wanted more time for things to grow and people to find their places, but if she waits then the only thing they will grow into will be a madman's wet dream.

Ahead of her, there is a fucked up path that awaits, and it involves a lot of things she isn't comfortable with, but thanks to Itachi, she does not walk it alone.

The tracking trio returns with heavy hearts and an air of dread. The three men are simultaneously ashamed, guilty, and tired after their journey. It's been days without sleep, tirelessly attempting to pick up the trail that went cold when they were stalled by the bicolored

monstrosity. However, it seemed that that the messenger hadn't been lying at all, and the trail had disappeared shortly after their meeting. Any trace of chakra or scent had either cut off completely, or had been drowned out by the light drizzle that had washed over the area after the confrontation.

Still, Tenzō had been the one to say that they needed to return. Perhaps it was because he was the one who had gone with the least sleep, or maybe it was because he had faith that things would work out. Either way, he saw no sense in chasing after something they weren't sure they should follow anyway. The threat had been plenty clear, after all.

Kakashi and Zabuza had been hesitant to agree, but eventually they began to grow sloppy from exhaustion. When the swordsman stumbled on a tree branch for the third time, and his senpai zoned out staring at the mud yet again, they knew it was time.

Though he is the least experienced, and perhaps the most worn of the three, Tenzō does not falter in his duty. Watanabe would have been upset if they pushed themselves like this, and he follows the path he feels she would have taken. He swallows a soldier pill dry, and he leads his team home.

The sight of Konoha fills him up with relief and remorse all at once, because this is his home, the place he loves and fights for. The rooftops they leap across are the same rooftops on which he suns himself on warm days, and the same ones that support him when he drags himself back from missions like this.

The remorse stems from his own failures. The failure to keep an eye on the kunoichi he called friend, and the failure to keep her safe, to bring her back. They came so close, he knows it, but not close enough.

Nobody speaks as they make their way towards the Hokage Tower to report in. In fact, they keep their silence even when they enter the

man's office to find that he is not alone, but surrounded by his three students.

Tenzō recognizes both Jiraiya and Tsunade, but his concern is saved for Orochimaru, who stands beside them. His heart leaps into his throat in fear, and though he does not falter, he does hesitate for half a second. The two men that joined him on this mission box him in on either side, and the surge of adrenaline that shoots through his veins helps to keep him wary.

The mood of the room turns sour when those gathered notice that a fourth member does not join them in their homecoming.

"Report," a voice barks. However, it is not Sarutobi, but his female student that gives the order. Senju Tsunade stands with her back to the window, her chestnut eyes molten and alive. Her arms remain crossed beneath her chest, and though she may not have the title or rank, Tenzō can almost feel the shifting power balance in the room. She has taken control of the situation, and no one has called her out on it. She reigns unchallenged, and he does not even hesitate to answer her.

"The assembled team picked up a faint trail traveling northwest about a kilometer outside of Konoha's walls. Though it was weak, we were able to follow it for around a day and a half due to our tracker's superior senses. However, pursuit was halted when an emissary of the presumed abductors intercepted us and delivered an ultimatum. Though it was established that the interloper was stalling for time after the confrontation, the threat remains," he says, his voice muffled behind his mask.

"What threat?" asks Jiraiya, and Tenzō feels Zabuza at his left shift in anger. Undoubtedly, some part of his mind is telling him that had the Toad Sage not sought her out, she would not have strayed so far on that night.

"Further pursuit would lead to the victim's demise," he summarizes succinctly.

The room goes silent for a moment, but nobody seems surprised at the news. If anything, the way the Sannin and their teacher exchange glances tells him the possibility of her demise had already been discussed.

"The mission is a failure, then," Orochimaru says dispassionately, and Tenzō shrinks under the weight of that voice. He instinctively tries to melt away, but his captain, his senpai, he places his hand on his back and remains firm when Tenzō himself cannot. He draws strength from him when he cannot bring himself to be strong on his own.

"If you think you could have done better, than you should have gone," Zabuza snaps. Golden eyes latch on to the man, and thin lips curl up in distaste at the sight of the worn Kiri shinobi.

"I wonder, how does it feel to have let her slip out of your hands twice now?" the Otokage rasps coldly, and Tenzo winces at the venom in that statement. There is no love lost between these two, and he senses that there is nothing but bad blood there.

"That's big talk for a man who was nowhere to be found when this group showed up, both times," Zabuza growls.

"Had you brought her to me in the first place, none of this would have happened, *boy* . Otogakure would have never been infiltrated by those abominable little rodents," Orochimaru hisses.

"We already talked about this. The one responsible for it is being held accountable. Even as we speak he pays for his crimes," Sarutobi says tiredly. He does not look pleased with this news. If anything, he looks heartbroken.

Orochimaru's expression turns ugly. "His death pays for *nothing* . He could die a dozen more times and I would not be sated. This is *your* failure as a leader-"

"Lay off, Orochimaru. It's not easy, and he's doing his best. No one expected this mess and we're all just trying to figure it out," Jiraiya cuts him off.

Kakashi seems to take it upon himself to remind the room that the returning group has no idea what they are talking about. He clears his throat, and when Tsunade's eyes land on him, he does his best to pretend he isn't as exhausted as he looks.

"I'm sorry, whose death?" he asks.

Tsunade meets the Hokage's eyes, and the old man sighs but waves her on. It looks like he is giving her his full permission to take the lead on this disaster.

"Elder councilman Danzō has been found guilty of selling inside information to a rogue organization of terrorists. He also appears to have been amassing a number of followers loyal to him even after being ordered to disband the group years ago," she says.

"Root," Tenzō whispers.

Tsunade's eyes latch onto him, and she nods slowly, leaning against the desk while her male teammates heatedly bicker in the background.

"Most members were identified by the man himself after some persuasion of the Yamanaka variety was used. Publicly, none of this gets out, and a month from now, the councilman dies from a serious wasting illness that he'd been hiding from everybody," she continues.

"She was *sold out*?" Zabuza seethes, and her eyes flick over to the Kiri delegate, as if remembering his nationality for the first time.

"It's being taken care of," she dismisses him.

"She trusted the Leaf," he bites out, taking a step forward, and Tsunade's eyes sharpen. She stands straighter as well, meeting the

challenge head on.

"That bastard has nothing to do with the village itself, and if it makes you happy, you can have his head after this is all done, but don't paint it black and white. She manipulated the Leaf just as much as we used her, and it was her own unit leader that abducted her, wasn't it?" she snaps back.

"Well, I guess that makes two of us with treacherous teammates," Zabuza states bitterly, and this time the woman flinches before puffing up with anger. Orochimaru seems to catch the statement and he turns to the man, his gaze serious.

"Do you have any idea what sort of mess she has left behind? That little girl has been meddling in so many pots-" Tsunade begins.

"How dare you question me when I was there when neither *you* nor that silver haired *mutt* were nowhere to be found, and yet you act so entitled-" Orochimaru rasps simultaneously.

Tap .

"I still can't believe Hatake didn't sleep with her. In fact, I adamantly refuse to believe it. Maybe she also slept with the swordsman, but he's a teammate so it doesn't count, so that means that this is strictly an internal affair-" Jiraiya announces to nobody in particular, shocking Tenzo so much that he jolts. Across the room, the Hokage chokes on his water.

"-big talk for the man who cut her throat-wait, what?" Kakashi stops, having been caught in the drama between the sannin and Zabuza.

Tap .

"-sleep with has nothing to do with anything. I'll sleep with Hatake, and nothing will change. This is about how your village failed to-" Zabuza continues aggressively, one hand on his blade, the other gesturing wildly.

"Tenzō, how do you feel about taking care of some of the shinobi coming out of the ROOT program. As a previous member, you have a unique... wait, why am I asking? Tenzō, you will-" Sarutobi joins in, shuffling some papers as the two groups of people begin to edge near each other with violent intent.

Tap. Tap.

"Sir, I'm not really sure this is the time-" Tenzō begins to say, reaching a state of shock.

"If you think you're ninja enough-"

"I'm not actually sure if I have or not at this point-"

"-cut your head off and let it join-"

"-entirely unqualified for-"

"-a hole the size of my hand through your-"

TapTapTapTapTap

"SOMEBODY OPEN THE WINDOW FOR THAT DAMN BIRD!"
Tsunade finally shouts, slamming her hand down on the desk behind her. The piece of furniture splinters, and a palm shaped hole opens up in the wood.

The room seems to freeze on the brink of anarchy, and a great many number of eyes slide over to the window where a single crow waits. The fading sunlight glints off of it's inky feathers, and they shimmer with a blue-green tinge.

Slowly, disbelievingly, Sarutobi opens the window. It creaks for a second, and the bird cocks it head to the side to peer around the room with one beady eye, searching for someone with an unnatural intelligence. It slowly scans, and when it lands on the trio, it opens up its wings, does an awkward hop skip, and then flaps through.

It alights above the group, and the intended recipient is never clear, but it opens its mouth to caw and a tiny parcel falls from its beak. The sound of its call echoes through the room, followed by the heavy flapping of wings, and then the only thing left of the bird is a cloud of feathers falling to the ground and the faint smell of smoke. Zabuza, the tallest of them, manages to snap the package out the air and clutch it in his fist.

"Crow summons," murmurs the Hokage, his eyes glazed with memory. In front of him, his wayward student seems to be working through a series of deductions behind half-lidded eyes.

Zabuza opens his palm, where a cloth-wrapped cylinder rests. When he goes to untie the fabric, he realizes it is a tiny strip of torn bedding wrapped around a paper rolled into a scroll. He unfolds it immediately.

An old favor repaid. Alive, but unsafe. Find handmaiden, ask her where I hid my heart .

Beneath it is a poorly drawn figure which he doesn't quite understand. It's a long line of red with a blot at the end, and it is drawn in what he suspects may be her only ink: blood.

"She managed to send a message," Hatake says softly, breathless as he reads over the other man's shoulder. Zabuza crumples the note in his hand, hiding it from view. They glance at each other, and it goes unsaid that this is for them and not Orochimaru. When all went south, she trusted someone over here to help her, not the man that she made a village with.

Orochimaru seems to be caught between displeasure and amusement, radiating a dark mirth. He sneers at the feathers on the ground, but his cold eyes say he appreciates a game well played. A well fought match, even if he didn't know he was being used.

"Uchiha Itachi," he hisses, finally giving a name to the contract holder.

"Great, what this situation really needed to be was even more complicated," Tsunade bites out. She sighs, raising her hand to rub at her temples while the room wonders how it is that the rogue Uchiha came to know the woman at all. "I doubt the brothel worker will clear things up any."

"Brothel worker?" Tenzō wonders curiously, and Tsunade eyes the group's worn and beaten state. She scowls, and gestures flippantly with her hands.

"She'll keep until you three can clean up. Rest if you can, but meet back here as soon as possible. I don't think it needs to be said that we should keep what we know to ourselves," the woman commands, and Zabuza grunts, already turning to leave.

"I don't follow your orders," he reminds them, and Jiraiya smiles softly from his corner of the room. Two weeks ago, if anybody had told him that his team would be gathered together, and three representatives of separate ninja villages would group up to collaborate on one problem, he would have laughed himself sick. Yet here he stands, watching it happen with his own eyes.

"No you don't," he agrees, crossing his arms, eyeing the occupants of the room. "But you'll be here anyways. You all will."

For her, he thinks, if nothing else.

AN: Sorry for a bit of a late update, but real life is what it is. This is going to be a quick an, mostly pointing out that Kisame still thinks he knows best, Ryuishi is an angry bean, the tracking team has formed a fraternity, and Jiraiya is a pervert. Also, Tsunade regrets Ryuishi existing, and Orochimaru is both infuriated and proud of being played by his own partner.

Shout out to my lurkers, many of whom contacted me in concern. Thank you. Also, my fav'ers and followers, ya'll get

me. And my reviewers... you can be a harsh, but also, you are lovely and kind. Bless you.

Many thanks to my beta Enbi, who is crushed with work but still finds time to edit my mess. Stay strong my friend. I believe in you.

Question: What was Hidan thinking when he felt the chakra surge? OR What is Jiraiya's opinion on this whole mess?

In Which There is A Rabbit Hole

I do not own Naruto. TW for mental health issues.

Faith, Misaki knows, is a difficult concept for some to grasp.

In it, there is a certain amount of the willing suspension of disbelief. One must face their doubts, and know, somewhere deep inside themselves, that their conviction overcomes such things. Many will act scornful, or condescending toward those that openly carry it, and there will at times be clashes between one person's faith and others.

To have faith though, is to have hope, and in a world where sometimes everything can be stripped away, hope is the only thing that another person cannot take. Faith is something that cannot be wrenched away. No one can reach inside and steal belief, because no one can kill an idea.

An idea never dies, Misaki. Even when everyone who ever heard it is dead, a thousand years from now, they will stumble upon it once more. You can't touch a thought, see it, smell it, taste it or hear it unless it is made real, but even when it is kept inside your head, it exists, the Rakki Ryuu once told her, smiling as she looked out upon the garden where Naruto played in the mud. We pass our thoughts on to others, so they can think on it a little more, maybe change it around, do something with it that we could not .

That is why Misaki holds on to her faith despite her fear, despite her grief and terror. She has lived a good life, longer than many and shorter than some, but if she were to be taken here and now, she knows that the ideas she believed in would continue on. She will fight against the end with everything she is, and she is scared witless, but she has hope. Hope that maybe this isn't where she dies, regardless of being held captive by shinobi. Hope that perhaps,

against all odds, the hairpin in the boy's hands is not the sign of an end, but rather a new beginning.

She knows now her first reaction was shortsighted. It was a kneejerk reaction based on shock and grief, but upon reflection, she needs to know more. The rest of the story must be told, and her decision must be both informed and wise. The Lady believed in her, believed that the bastard daughter of a lowly noble and concubine could hold power and sway, and Misaki will prove that her dedication was not unfounded.

She simply wants to ensure the idea she was trusted with lives on, that it reaches those it was meant to.

So when the Odayaka Oni enters the room she is confined to, and stares her down, she thanks every higher power that might be out there. Yes, he is a terrifying shinobi who could end her in the blink of an eye, and yes, he may be a blood-stained demon. But the Rakki Ryuu trusted him like she trusted no other. He is one of the three that saw her through the hard times, the idea she believed in when she could not believe anything else.

He stands, and he unhooks something from his blade and tosses it onto the floor where she sits. The dim light catches it, and she sighs in relief when she brushes her hands against the cool metal, picking it up and cradling it in her palms. This is an idea made real, a physical manifestation of the faith that the Rakki Ryuu had in her demon.

Misaki runs her fingers across the medallion, her thumbs caressing its bronze surface. The chains that encircle the images thread them together like red ribbons of fate, and she knows that her belief is not unfounded. Even after he came back, he held on to it.

"Where did she hide her heart?" the Oni asks her, and in that moment, Misaki knows that her Lady is more than mortal. No one person could plan so far ahead, and no human could ensnare so many with their ideas.

"Did you know that our Lady never commanded us?" Misaki says, turning the pendant over in her hands. The sides of it are worn smooth, as if somebody has spent a long time just holding it as she does now. It's not hard to believe, not when they were apart for so long. "She barked out orders sometimes, but if we had a question, or protested an option, she listened."

The man does not blink. He simply glowers down at her, crossing his arms over his chest. Without anyone else to stand beside him, he looks menacing, the light playing over his features and casting them in shadow. The brown of his eyes seems to be molten and fluid, never pausing, always watching.

"One of the biggest tenets she ever taught us was that choices were to be respected, as long as they did no harm upon others. That no matter what, we always should have a choice," Misaki continues. Her fingers close over the cold metal, and she breathes out through her nose, closing her eyes.

"Tell me why the boy has her hairpin, and I will decide what it is you need to know," she says, and her heart stutters in her chest. She knows what she should do, what she was asked to do, but she has a choice. She always has a choice, and she needs to know what has happened to the woman that gave her purpose, to the figure of her faith.

He examines her then for the first time since entering the cell. He is an imposing figure, and his presence cuts like a knife, but he seems to weigh her words. He measures out her worth through her deeds and loyalty, and he finds her worthy as the woman before him once did.

"She was taken," he replies, his voice low and dangerous, but the danger is not directed at Misaki herself.

Something inside her chest eases, while another part of her seems to clench. Her Lady is not dead, but she has been spirited away by

unseen forces. Not dead, but not here. The future is uncertain, but Misaki has strength.

She opens her blue eyes and lift her head, staring up at the man with determination.

"The Rakki Ryuu hid her heart in pieces, and she tasked three people to know where. In the event that she disappeared, we were given the option of what to do, and I believe that there is more that you need to know." Her voice shakes. She is unsure, and she is going off script, but this is her choice. "She said she hid fragments in the sun, sand, and snow. I was given guardianship over the sun, and I was told that should things go awry, I was to take it and disappear," she admits, and she clenches the medallion for strength.

His eyes sharpen. "The brat," he says slowly. "Naruto."

She nods, swallowing. Her mouth is dry because she is revealing things she is unsure about revealing, but the Lady had faith in Misaki, and she had faith in the swordsman. "She said the snow was in the hands of a demon, and he would see it safe, and that the tribe would move to collect the sand, but I don't know now. The demon and snow are more obvious, and the sand remains a mystery-"

"I know who it is," he grunts, and yes, that is reassuring.

She nods. "I love my lady, and I trust her, but I also love Naruto. He has become the child I will never have, and I cannot... I cannot tear his dream away from him," Misaki whispers. "His team has become a second family to him, and he loves this village. But if I let things go as they are, things will devolve into chaos, and I know she would not want that. Not when it would mean that the pieces of her heart would be dragged into bloodshed."

For a moment there is quiet, and it continues when Misaki stands from her seat. She reaches out her hand, giving back the gold medallion, and she holds onto her hope.

"The Rakki Ryu gave me a piece of her heart to protect, and she gave one to you. She trusted us with the future and reminded us we always have a choice. I chose to trust in the ninja she trusted. However, if the Rakki Ryu does not re-appear within three months, the others will act," Misaki warns, and she does not shy away when the callused fingers of his hand scrape against her soft skin to take the medallion.

"You want to help," he comments, clipping the pendant back onto the hilt of his sword.

"Despite who you are and what she has said, many of the Mumei hold no love for ninja. She accepted that, and she respected their choice. You will need someone who knows the way things work inside the community she gave us," Misaki says, meeting his gaze. She cringes under the ferocity of it, but she does not back down.

He stares at her, searching for something, and whatever it is he seems to find it. He nods, and pivots around to open the door to her cell.

Misaki walks through the door, holding on to that strange concept, that glowing ember deep in the center of her being. Other people might not understand, might not grasp it, but she does. She has ever since she was a little girl, when the Lucky Dragon first rose from the Mist and began to change the world.

We pass our thoughts on to others, so they can think on them a little more, maybe change them around, do something with them that we could not.

The people of the world have relied on the Dragon to raise them up and care for them long enough. Now, it is time to show her that they can use her teachings and do things by themselves.

She looks at the legend in front of her and thinks of the group that she has come to know during her stay here. The Otokage, the Last Hatake, the Odayaka Oni, the boy with the gentle smile and the team

that her Sunshine has found for himself. The images of them in her mind's eye fill her with determination.

I will protect your heart, Misaki thinks, in return for all the times you shared it with the world.

Haku knows the moment that the words leave Hatake-san's lips that things will not go the way he wants them to.

He can almost imagine it from the Naruto's point of view. His ears ringing after he finally understands, and his growing tunnel vision. There will only be the news, echoing inside his skull, over and over again.

She's not here, he'll hear. The woman who played with you, who taught you your colors and showed you how to build a pillow fort and other secrets of living. The monsters took her, the men in black cloaks.

Do you remember them? Do you remember what they did to her the first time? Do you remember the way her side caved in, and how she breathed red foam? How she screamed, and then drifted away, asleep for an entire month?

They have her now. They have her and they could do anything. She could be screaming right now, so cold and alone. Will the hands that tucked you in at night still work when they are through? Will she still sing, or will they take that as well?

He is only a little surprised when Naruto's eyes grow red and slitted. The whiskers on his cheeks make more sense now, and it explains Ryuishi's initial interest with him. She always did have a soft spot in her heart for demons, bastards, and other broken things.

Haku watches through dispassionate eyes and thinks that they shouldn't have told him. None of the genin have a right to be here,

and the only reason they are allowed is because Misaki-san refused to leave him out of it.

"I won't say anything without him there," she had said. "Go ahead, piece together the clues, but know that he's going to find out one way or another. If you think he can't keep a secret, you're wrong. After all, none of you knew he was raised by us until he told you himself."

If he is honest with himself, part of him blames them for her disappearance. It lashes out and pins responsibility on all of Konoha. His mother would have never been taken if she had stayed away from this godforsaken place. The organization only found them when they came into contact with this team.

Zabuza-sama holds his shoulder, and Haku leans into his hand while they watch the jinchuuriki boy tear a path of destruction through the clearing, screaming to the heavens. His team seems terrified by this change, crouching away from him and seeking shelter. Their sensei carries Misaki into the trees as the boy forms craters in the ground, and even he seems a little stunned. The air bubbles with malignant, awful chakra that washes over his senses and instills a primal urge to run.

Haku ignores it. He was trained by Zabuza and Ryuishi, and bijuu chakra is just a magnified level of their own. It's more pure, more heady and distilled, but it is familiar enough to him. At another time, he would be both awed and terrified by it, but Haku is overwhelmed by the keen sting of grief, and the cold bite of hatred.

He *hates* the Akatsuki. He hates them to pieces, and everyone that claims affiliation with them. He wants to rise up and tear them apart, and though he has never killed before, he has no doubt that he could do it right now.

In a way, he sympathizes with Naruto. He understands what it is to lose someone, to feel them be taken away. He is just as angry and upset, just as hurt and sad. However, where the sun burns hot, the

snow burns cold. And that's what they are, the sun and the snow, pieces of a dragon's heart, determined to find her again.

He holds on to that hope, that fragile light that shines despite the darkness. His mother, clever and sly, is still alive. She is trapped by the dawn, but nothing and no-one can keep her quiet. Even an entire village could not keep her from sneaking about.

Haku knows that before this moment he was a child. He thought he was an adult, spoke all the words and said all the right things, but he was just a boy playing a part. Looking out at the scene and feeling the hand steadying him, he knows he may yet remain one in some ways, but he is growing, and the age of his adolescence is ending.

Naruto pauses in his carnage, the trees around him torn and scratched, shattered into stumps and splinters. He looks up, and the sound he lets out is a long, wounded wail, and Haku knows in his heart what it is he must do.

He jumps before Zabuza can tighten his hold, and he leaps from the safety of his nest. For a moment, there is a sense of weightlessness, a split second where time seems to stop and he is flying. The weight of the world cannot hold him, and he soars free.

Gravity returns in the blink of an eye, and he knows he is afraid of the thing down in the clearing. Knows that it can hurt him and that he is taking a risk, but that is his mother's heart, and he cannot bear to see it so broken.

"Haku!" Zabuza yells, but he isn't a just a tool or a weapon to be used. He is the snow, a piece of a dragon's heart connecting with another.

"I know!" he calls out, and it catches the attention of both the boy below and all the watchers in the clearing.

Slitted red eyes turn on him, and the blond bares his teeth like an animal. He snarls, feral and wild, and Haku is reminded of inky black

hair and a body sliding through water. Of beachfront spars and the clashes of titans.

He lands, and the grass cushions his feet. He stares into the eyes of his brother, and his brother stares back. "I know it hurts, Naruto!" Haku shouts, and the jinchuuriki spits at the sound of his voice, letting out a whine. "I know you're scared and in pain, but you have to get ahold of yourself!"

"She's **GONE** !" he roars. "We **FAILED HER** !"

Haku takes a step forward, ignoring the sound of his guardian landing behind him. His caretakers will always be there for him if he fails, he knows that now. They will guard his back and comfort him when he is hurt. But they are people, same as him. They have hurts and scars as well, and sometimes, he has to take charge of his own life.

"No, we didn't fail her. She's still alive, and we can still get her back, but you have to get it together. The people that took her will take advantage of every weakness that they can, and if you aren't up for it, the you really will have failed," he says firmly.

Naruto lunges, almost faster than Haku can track, but that was something he accepted as a possibility. He weaves his hand through the seals while the other rests by his side. He has always been praised for his skill in molding chakra, and it comes in handy when the boy surges into him the same moment he falls back into a mirror.

"Look at yourself," he commands, flitting from ice mirror to ice mirror, utilizing the gift his bloodline gave him. "Do you see how angry you are, how out of control? Do you think it helps?"

"Shut up!" Naruto bellows, throwing himself at a reflection. The mirror cracks, but Haku does not waver. He shifts around to another, keeping himself safe.

Naruto *screams*, tearing at his surroundings with hands wreathed in red. "She was there! She was there and she saw me before anybody else did, and those bastards took her . **I'll kill them!** "

"Rage all you want. Destroy and break apart, because she accepted this part of you as well, but you have to wake up at some point because this won't bring her back. The only thing it will do is scare and hurt, and now is the time to come together," Haku says, a guiding hand amidst the chaos.

Naruto keens, and he hurls himself against the new reflection halfheartedly and stays there. Haku hesitates behind the barrier for just a moment, but he grits his teeth together and reaches out into the world once more, running his fingers through the blond's hair, remembering another who did the same.

Naruto's body shudders, and he makes a choking sound, leaning into the touch. The noise decides Haku's actions for him, and he slips back into the real world, embracing the younger boy before he's even really thinking about it.

"She's gone," Naruto sobs, his fingers winding into the fabric of Haku's robes. He clutches at them desperately, leaning against the other boy for support.

"Just for now," Haku assures him, wrapping his arms around him. "Not forever."

The sound of ice shattering fill his ears and he closes his eyes, cradling Naruto in his arms while the boy cries into his chest. He still hates the Akatsuki, but the hollowness in his chest seems to fade as the jinchuuriki weeps.

He won't make the same mistakes Ryuishi-sama did. He won't bottle up his feelings and let them consume him, and he won't be ruled by reckless passion. He will let love drive him, but also show restraint, and he won't let anyone else self destruct.

That's how he will play this game. Forward, not back, with more pieces to the puzzle than what the people before him started with.

Strong arms wrap around the joined duo, hauling them up and crushing them together. A hand squeezes tight around Haku's bicep, and he is convinced that for a moment it is afraid to let go.

"Don't you ever do something like that again, either of you," Zabuza barks roughly as the jutsu shatters around them, drifting like glitter through the air. The minuscule pieces of ice shine like jewels in the sun as they fall to the forest floor, revealing a harried-looking Kakashi being harassed by the rest of his team.

The moment the walls come down, though, every face whirls to witness the scene. Sakura lets out a squawk of concern and pushes off her teacher to dart towards them, closely followed by the Uchiha.

"Naruto, Haku! You two are okay!" Sakura cries out, slamming into the group and tangling her limbs around them with abandon. Haku lets out a soft noise of surprise, because he hadn't thought he would be included in that concern on quite that level.

"Idiots," Sasuke says without heat, gracefully ignoring the tear tracks. He seems content to simply stand near them until Sakura's arm snakes out and smashes him in with the rest of them. The fact that he doesn't protest the action is revealing in and of itself.

"You're all idiots," Zabuza rumbles.

"We're all idiots," Kakashi corrects, approaching the group warily. He eyes it apprehensively before Misaki shoves him into it as well.

"We'd all better smarten up then," she states, throwing herself in and wrapping her arms around the group as best she can. She plants a kiss on all four of the children's heads, and Naruto keens, cocooned by the wall of people. "There isn't much room for stupidity in our future."

Kakashi sighs, and he meets the eye of Zabuza across from him in this impromptu hugging session. He knows that the woman speaks the truth. He can sense the minutes ticking away, like sand through an hourglass. Somewhere out there, traps are just waiting to be sprang and mines wait to go off.

He closes his eyes and remembers the story of how this all came to be, the pieces and parts and clues. Too many lonely, broken people, and too many wounds gone unhealed. It can't go on anymore.

Despite the deadlines and the rush, there is time enough for this.

The cold bothers her more than it should, even after all these years.

Her pride won't allow her to seek comfort from another, and she tries to convince herself that her rage keeps her warm. But the anger doesn't quite keep the stinging sensation out of her fingers and toes, or the goosebumps from her skin.

She wishes Zabuza was here. She doesn't know where he is, or what he is doing, but she knows he isn't here. Kisame wouldn't be in such a dour mood if he was, and she knows that she would be able to find him if he came.

No, he's somewhere out there, safe from all of this. Hopefully he's looking after Haku, and Kakashi has managed to knock some sense into them. Then the two of them can start unravelling things like she wants, staying safe with her children, far away from wherever here is.

She shivers once, and even then she keeps it muted and hidden away from the eyes that watch her. As far as first meetings go, this certainly is a memorable one.

Kisame stands behind her, blocking her exit and keeping her from running or doing something as equally stupid. He's like a solid wall at

her back, and she feels like a cornered animal, feral and afraid. A part of her wonders if they can see that in her eyes.

Three chairs lay in front of her, and the figures seated in them seem to be fixated upon her every move. It takes an enormous amount of willpower to stand as Orochimaru taught her and not lash out on instinct.

She holds her chin high, her back straight and unbowed, and she looks down her nose at every single one of them. She tries to hold on to the fact that she is powerful in her own right, that she has done just as much as they have, but it wilts under the fact that everyone in this room could crush her like a bug if they wanted to. That her secrets and foreknowledge are useless in the face of superior might. Who cares if she knows all their names and backstories? What does it help in this moment?

The worse part is the howling Void inside one of them, the screaming abyss that calls out to her from the possessed corpse seated in the middle chair. It echoes inside her head and she wants to turn away from it, to run until it cannot reach her anymore, but she knows she can't escape the watchful gaze of those ripple-patterned eyes.

Really, she should be concerned about the masked figure to his left, or entranced by the frozen statue to his right, but the corpse's eyes hold hers, and she cannot look away. Not when like calls to like, and emptiness swims just below the surface of his skin.

"It is good that you are finally here," Pain intones, and his voice makes her lungs hurt. It makes something inside her scream out for air despite the fact she is already breathing. "I have long wished to meet you-or perhaps I should say, I have long wished to meet the Rakki Ryuu."

Sweet Buddha on a bicycle that's scary, she thinks. She doesn't even know why he freaks her out so much, only that he does.

"You have done great works across the continent, many of which I have interest in. Your teachings pique my curiosity. A philosophy of harmony and peace in-"

"You're wrong," she interjects, cutting him off. The silence that follows is deafening, and she swallows. Her hands clench into fists behind her back and she fights back another shiver. "I never said anything about peace. Only freedom of choice and mutual respect. Probably something about human rights and common decency as well. But not peace, never that."

Konan narrows her amber eyes, and part of Ryuishi wonders what level of fucked up do you have to be to puppet your friend's dead body around in his memory, especially if you have to impale it with a bunch of metal rods before you can possess it. A different part wonders if she wouldn't do the same thing, if she has reached that level of crazy yet.

"Oh?" the masked figure-and oh, how she would love to punch him right in the scrotum-asks, and her attention snaps to him. "Are those not roads to peace?"

"Peace doesn't exist," she says immediately, and then considers her words. "I mean, inner peace might, and harmony is probably obtainable as long as you equate harmony with synergy. Peace as in tranquility or freedom from disturbances exists, but not that other thing."

Pain levels a contemplative look at her, and she can feel Kisame glaring down from his place among the giants. Why is it that she ate the same exact food as her boys when they were children, but genetics saw fit to keep her only marginally taller than some? WHY is it that they get to swagger around with their tall stature and top-shelf reaching capabilities while she stands that much closer to hell?

Somewhere inside her mind, she realizes that she is in that strange nervous fear state that comes just before outright terror and a while before not giving a fuck. Her body wants to move, to dart around and

run free of this room and just keep going, or maybe lash out and start screaming wildly while she attacks. Her pulse may be steady, and her hands might not tremble, but that's because she learned to control it. She's suppressing it, lying with her entire form.

"It doesn't exist now," Pain concedes. Thinking on it more, everyone has really pale skin here but her. Or, well, she assumes Kisame is pale. He's blue, and therefore an outlier that should not be counted. "But it can exist."

"I don't know. That was never my goal," she admits.

"Then what was?" he queries, and she grits her teeth.

"The willing liberation of a subjugated people, higher education levels among the general populace, higher levels of both justice and mercy where the needed quality was due, establishment of trade lines, extended age of life expectancy, high health in rural populations, better access to health care in general, the termination of the use of child soldiers, the abolishment of a heritage-based ruling class, obliteration of the caste system, higher quality of life, increased productivity in agriculture, higher yield in-" she rambles, trying to list them all.

"But what for? Why did you do these things?" the masked man interrupts her, and she makes a face.

She comes up short. "Because..."

Because people deserved them? Because she could? Because she was judging an entirely different world by the standards she had learned in a previous one? Because her entire thought process and being was created by a society and culture that didn't exist inside the scope of this reality?

Was... Was Kisame right?

She snaps her mouth closed, her eyes on the floor, darting side to side. No, he isn't right. She has done good things. Making schools wasn't bad. Revolutionizing farming helped across the entire continent, and that was good. People followed her because she showed results, good results.

But then again, having a following didn't make it right. It just meant that a portion of the population received a positive stimulus from her actions or teaching. They understood it and it spoke to them, but people once did terrible things because they understood it and it spoke to them.

Her actions also had resulted in a number of deaths and conflicts. She had done some pretty messed up things for her cause, but then again, what was terrible? What made her actions right or wrong?

Also, why was it her responsibility? Why did she in particular have to do it? She knew that eventually, things would work out if she left them alone. The plot she blew to hell said it would, but then again, so many people had suffered. Naruto had a much better childhood this time around, and Gaara was incredibly stable and healthy in comparison. Kakashi was her friend, and Orochimaru didn't invade and Haku and Zabuza and Kisame-

"Because no one else would," she says lamely, and it's not really an answer at all. The one she has stumbled upon she finds distasteful, and she won't acknowledge it at all.

(You did it because you couldn't bear to be alone, to lose anyone else, a piece of her taunts. Selfish selfish selfish. Psycho psycho psycho.)

"Because you felt pain," the corpse says. "You did what you did because you hurt, and you grew from that. You turned it into drive, and you became a god, fueled by your agony."

Ryuishi bristles at the insinuation, caught unprepared by the accusation. She bares her teeth at the body seated in the chair, and

she ignores the way the masked man seems to radiate contentment, or how Konan watches her with keen eyes. "Don't psychoanalyze me you fuck, I didn't asked to be called that!" she spits. It's only when Kisame grabs her shoulder that she notices that she had been shifting forward, preparing to lunge at the figure.

"What is a god but one who shapes the world to their will?" Pain challenges.

Her hackles raise. "Literally anything that exists with some amount of sentience reshapes reality to some extent," she bites out. "Insomuch that they move shit around to better suit them. Birds build nests, dogs bury bones-

"-and gods shape people," Konan interjects tonelessly. "They lead those civilizations, stand as something to believe in when all else fails. Their words shift populations and inspire creation."

Ryuishi sputters, because that certainly doesn't fit her definition of divinity. Gods or God or Spirits or whatever else, they exist separately from human conception, if they exist. They are independent of humans, in a way. Or, theoretically, humans created them and were dependent on a force that was their own making.

(Alright. So she doesn't get faith. It's not a thing she understands.)

"Regardless of philosophy or cause, it stands that we offer you a chance to work with us willingly," Pain says, and she laughs, sharp and maybe a bit unhinged.

"You fucking kidnapped me! Corrupted a man I believed in! There is nothing you could do..." she begins, but she trails off when the corpse reaches out with his open palm. For a moment, she doesn't understand, because there is nothing inside it but a little white ball that gleams like a pearl. And what use does she have for pearls when she could buy a country with her profits?

She sucks in a breath when she realizes that it is not a pearl, but a pill. Her heart stutters to a halt inside her chest, and her blood runs cold.

"See, we all thought it was funny that anyone would willingly work with Orochimaru, especially after such poor treatment, but you really didn't have a choice, did you?" the masked man says, and she can feel her hands begin to tremble despite her efforts to stop the tremors. The cold suddenly seems all-consuming, stealing the breath from her lungs and the fight from her body. "The medic who worked on you when you were in a coma diluted the chemicals into your IV bags when he thought no one was watching, and you took these every morning, according to our spy. I wonder how long that snake had you hooked...?"

"T-That's not why I take them," she stutters, and Kisame's hand on her shoulder feels like a dead weight dragging her into hell. "Listen to me, I need those. I'm not fucking around."

The condescending noise of compassionate understanding the masked figure lets out makes her feel sick, and she realizes in dawning horror what the endgame is. She's outclassed, outnumbered, and outplayed.

"I bet he convinced you of that. He's been messing around with your central nervous system for a very long time now. The chemicals in this have been used in T&I for various reasons. Use them long enough, and the body develops a dependence on them," he states understandingly, and she feels panic creeping up, closing her throat. How long has it been? A couple days? It's built up in her system, but it will take only a few short weeks to unravel her. A month, tops.

She can't even retaliate. If she points out the truth of them, who they are, no one will believe her. Those who know will only grow more strict in their punishment and persecution of her. It might even push them over the edge to the point where they just execute her outright.

"Don't," she croaks, swallowing hard. "Don't do this."

"We can taper you off," Konan says calmly, and Ryuishi hisses, low and wounded.

"It's not a fucking addiction! I don't take them recreationally, I take them because I *need* them," she pleads.

She needs them to think. Needs them to balance out her moods and hold her together. Needs them because she knows if she doesn't take them, than all the little fragments of herself shatter apart, and there will be nothing but hellfire nightmares and hallucinations. It will be panic attacks and anxiety, despair and disassociation with reality. It's depression and mania and so much more.

She needs them because without them, there is only madness and ruin where there once was a person.

"Time will tell us if that is true, but from what we know, you can be quite the liar," the masked man singsongs.

"Assist us willingly, and we can make it easier," Pain offers temptingly. "We are not without mercy."

Her body floods with horror as she looks at them. She takes a step back, and then another, but her back bumps into the solid, sturdy frame of Kisame's chest. His hand is still on her shoulder, and she realizes she's quivering, trembling from the cold and her own fear.

If she gives in then all she loves, all she has built, is at risk. It already is, but there remains hope that things can continue without her, that situations may be salvaged. If she works with the Akatsuki though, then that hope fades. No matter how much she lies and cheats, no matter how clever she is, there will be consequences.

If she doesn't, than there is a chance some information slips out anyway, but worse than that, she goes back to what she has been trying to stay away from for years. That catatonic, manic mess that wandered the countryside and drowned everything out. She

becomes jagged pieces, a buzzing hive and an empty head all at once.

"Fuck you," she whispers, because that's what she can manage. Not a shriek, not a bellow or war cry. She can fucking whisper in defiance, and by god, so long as she can, she will.

Everyone in the room seems like they expected nothing else, and she is glad that they didn't. They think that they know what they are doing, but they are winging it just as hard as she is, and it is going to bite them in the ass.

"Perhaps you will change your mind in the coming weeks," Pain allows, and she watches a black-gloved hand close around the tiny pill, fingers curling around it and hiding it from view.

"You will be observed as time progresses. A trusted member of the organization will remain with you at all times to ensure your health, and the safety of others. You are free to change your mind at anytime," Konan states serenely, and she clenches her jaw as she shivers. They are treating this like it's going to be a clear-cut case of withdrawal symptoms rather than the slow degradation of sanity it's actually going to be. She doesn't care if this is some plan concocted because they honestly believe Orochimaru has been toying with her brain chemistry to ensure loyalty, or if they are flat out torturing her to soften her will, because this ends poorly. Not just for her, for everyone involved.

"Is this what you wanted, Kisame?" she asks quietly, looking down. "Is this your revenge?"

"It's not about revenge," he corrects her. "This about getting you free of a madman's hold and finding the truth."

She closes her eyes and wraps her arms around herself. She's scared, so fucking scared to face the downward spiral that approaches her.

"I don't think you're going to like the truth very much," she whispers. In fact, she knows he won't.

No one will.

AN: So, shit gets pretty real in upcoming chapters, because, you know, Akatsuki. However, there is a light at the end of this tunnel. I also want to say that it is an established fact that long term medication is exceedingly rare in this story. And mental health care? Absolutely unheard of. Incredibly so. I would encourage those who questions the actions to look at them through another POV. Because what do the Akatsuki known Orochimaru as? AND what does Ryuishi know him as?

Thank you to my lurkers, my fav's and followers. A dance party for my Reviewers.

A shout out to my beta enbi. They are, as always, incredible.

Question: What do you think of The Void inside the Paths? OR Does Tobi really believe what he is spewing?

In Which Others Take the Wheel

I do not own Naruto. TW for withdrawal symptoms, mentions of past trauma, panic attacks, and PTSD symptoms along with several others. Also, sorry for all the angst.

The nightmares come back first.

To be honest, they never really left. Ryuishi doesn't think they ever will truly leave, but they had been getting farther and farther apart. They used to come only a few times each month, if that, and they had been slowly losing their intensity. Waking up disoriented and scared had become a once in awhile thing, especially with the addition of bunkmates. Zabuza had learned just how to card his fingers through her hair and mumble nonsense until she fell back asleep.

She doesn't know if it's psychosomatic stress or an actual withdrawal that triggers it, but the night terror that she wakes up from makes up for lost time, slamming into her with vengeance. She shoots up from a dead sleep, coated in a cold sweat, and the lines between past and present don't exist.

She's there, and she can hear the crackling of fire in her ears the same way she can feel her gills in her mouth and the weight of a meteor hammer in her hands.

She chokes for breath, her heart pounding in her chest, and she scrambles to find her Unit. A cloud of kunai soars overhead, and she hears the clink of metal on metal. There is iron in her mouth, and she shivers from the cold of the water on her skin-

She relives that memory for Buddha knows how long. Every aching moment seems to stretch out, and there is no Zabuza there to soothe her, no Kakashi to make her laugh. It's just her and a

flashback until she comes back to reality, and when she comes to, Itachi is staring at her in the darkened room with shuttered eyes.

She feels bitter in that moment, bitter and shaken. She looks at him and she knows that he's trying, knows that he is watched and must play his role, but she hates this slow decline like she once hated Kiri.

He's her only hope in this place, the only chance she might get out, the only one who might be able to sneak her medication, and in that moment she despises him.

"Take a good long look," she chatters, her hands trembling.
"Because this is just the start."

He doesn't say anything, but he does look away from her. She doesn't know if it his act of kindness, or his own hesitance to look at the ugly truth. She just knows she goes through every stretch Orochimaru ever taught her, winding her body around and around, pushing it so she can take her mind out of where it hovers.

She doesn't go back to sleep that night.

The withdrawal is insidious in its pace, slowly advancing, like the inevitable rise of the moon or the setting of the sun. It gives her time to think about it, to question her every action and ask why she is doing it, to wonder when she will lose her thought process, and if today is the day she breaks.

The physical symptoms aren't incredibly bad, not for an immediate cessation of medication. She counts herself lucky that she doesn't break out in convulsions actually. As much as Orochimaru regularly messed around with the dosages and ingredients, she still has been taking it long enough for her system to build a reliance on it, and convulsions and seizures are a possibility.

Tremors become a part of her life, and she tries to quell them at first, but she knows she's doing it poorly when Kisame stares at her the chopsticks in her hand with a masked expression. She wants to beat

him across the face with her shaking fists, but she ignores him, like she has been doing since he first took her to meet his bosses. He doesn't deserve her energy, not when she has to conserve it and stay focused.

At one point, she paces the length of her cell. (It's not a room, never a room. It has a bed and bathroom, but she's wearing dull clothes a smidgeon too big, and she doesn't have anything to call her own. The walls are dull and gray, just like Orochimaru's hideouts and *she is eleven again, desperately searching for somebody, anybody at all-*)

She walks up, down, across the floor, across the ceiling, then back again. She counts her steps and wonders how long it will take Itachi to see that she's losing her fucking mind. How much time must pass before he realises that she can't do this?

She starts singing under her breath to fight the silence and ward off the cyclic thoughts. It doesn't stop the clouded, frantic feeling that grows inside of her, though.

"You sing now," Kisame comments, and she shudders before snapping her jaw shut in determination, treading down the stone surface of her cage. Maybe if she starts making this exercise harder, it will demand more of her focus.

Cartwheels, maybe. No, backbends. Backbends across the ceiling and walls and floor, at least eighty laps. Then she can start doing her push-ups and squats. She has to keep moving, keep focused.

"Who were those people you showed me?" he asks, and she is confused for a moment. What people? She has shown him jack shit since they met up. In fact, she's been pointedly ignoring his ass. The last time she saw him, he stabbed her as she hit him with a genjutsu.

When she realizes what he's talking about, her focus slips, and the chakra holding her to the wall falters. For a second she is swamped by images of curling brown hair and freckles, laughter she spent

years etching into her mind, and a family she she still misses. Twenty-four years, and it isn't fresh, but it still hurts.

She wonders why it matters anymore. She came to terms with the fact that she would never see any of them again. Not her father or mother, not her sweet baby girl. She made another family, and though they aren't the same, they are still good. Still hers.

"What happened?"

Her breath hitches, and before she can deflect the train of thought, she is falling asleep under heavy sedation. The heart in her chest begins to slow to a stop, and the hospital blankets scratch at her skin as she closes her eyes.

The void, the howling abyss, it is everywhere. She's stuck inside of it as it seeps inside the very essence of herself, and she is numb as it begins to peel her away, unmake all that she is. Tendrils of nothing seal themselves inside of her, and they reach out to grasp at that glowing ember of self.

She's stuck there, only peripherally aware that she has stumbled down from the vertical surface to stand on the ground once more, leaning against the wall for support. Her sense are stolen from her, and she pants for breath. Time loses all meaning.

Her body act instinctively in her subdued, panicked state, and her chakra pours like water from a raised glass. She flares it out, trying to reach out, to grasp onto something, and it sings to those who listen for it.

In the back of her head she is aware of a cacophony of sound, a series of shouts and bellows. The sound of weapons meeting, and the meaty thud of flesh meeting flesh. Somebody is cursing the air blue, and her eyes process the color white.

The cursing fully registers, more specifically the perpetrator of it, and she thinks as she begins to return to herself, *Oh by the sweet mother*

moon, the eternal nothing has fucking Hidan in it.

"Move out of the way, you cocksucker!" the man commands, dodging out of the way of a fist. He's just on the other side of her shattered door, the ink from the seals sliding down the walls like black blood.

"This time I'm keeping your legs so you can't crawl back," Kisame growls.

Ryuishi dry heaves, and the world around her spins like a merry go round as sensation begins to leak back into the forefront of her mind. She tastes bile on the back of her tongue, and her stomach protests the meager amount of food she has been able to force down. Her muscles cry out against her standing position and the abuse they have been put through since this all began.

Fuchsia eyes latch onto the sound, and the manic, giddy grin Hidan sends her makes her want to laugh at the absurdity of it all, laugh as an impending sense of fatalism crashes over her.

"Found you again, doll," he shouts, and his expression is positively *delighted*. "Lookin' pretty shitty these days, but I guess that's all part of process."

The sound of her own frantic gasps for air fill her ears, and she watches Kisame slam his knee into the other man's gut, sending him tumbling out of view. He stalks forward to finish what he started, and the doorway is empty save for splinters and ink.

Ryuishi doesn't even stop to think about it. The walls are closing in around her, and the Void skitters like a living thing, writhing inside and threatening to take over once more. She stumbles off of the wall she is leaning on, loses her balance, and ends up on the floor.

Panic floods her, and for some reason she knows without a shadow of a doubt that if she doesn't move, she's dead. She'll die, just like the first time, far away from her family, all alone in a strange place.

She bolts.

Kisame's half startled, half angry protest is cut short with the sound of solid hit connecting and a grunt of pain. Hidan cackles, and the sound of his mirth echoes in her head.

"That's it, bitch! Break down and be reborn!," he cheers, and it's the last straw. She can't help the bubbling hysteria that climbs her throat and escapes in a burst of laughter.

Her feet remain underneath her even as the walls melt and the world spins, and she flees from that place, running from whatever chases her. Her heart beats inside of her chest like a hummingbird's, and her muscles groan at even more exercise, but she doesn't stop.

No more grey walls, no more windowless cell. No more cold biting at her skin, and no more tense silences. She can't handle it.

Her breath fogs in the air, and her chakra slides around, singing just beneath her skin. She rockets down a long stretch of hallway, then takes the first offshoot she can, then another sharp turn, and another. It's a maze of interconnected hallways, all in shades of grey. Steel pipes snake across walls and ceilings, and she can hear the hiss of steam from within them.

A set of stairs appear and she throws herself up them, the ache in her side growing. Her bare feet slap against the ground, and the scenery begins to blur into the same tone.

You don't know what to do with good things. You're toxic, Jiraiya says, his voice leaking into her mind like poison. For a second she can swear he is right behind her, whispering into her ear.

I knew you were sneaky nee-san, but I didn't think you were stupid, Naruto says, disappointment lacing his every word. She sees a flash of orange out the corner of her eye, but she keeps running, chanting a mantra of 'it's not real' under her breath.

And a liar, Gaara says, his eyes full of betrayal and uncertainty. He stands right in front of her, arms crossed, and she tears through him, sprinting through his shade like her life depends on it. His form wavers like dust, breaking apart into smoke.

How could you be so irresponsible? Haku says, and oh, she misses him. She misses his sweet smiles. His overbearing protectiveness makes her want to cuddle the image of him her mind has conjured up, but death is right behind her and she keeps moving.

She's a savage from Kirigakure, who never cared about anything but herself, Kakashi says, full of anger and hurt from the secrets she kept. He looms, looking down at her judgmentally, and she passes by him as she flees.

You built yourself up, hoarded power made from money and secrets. You dug your nose into everybody's darkest places, consorted with criminals and traitors of the worst sort. You manipulated and you lied, used people like pieces in some sort of game, Kisame says, accusatory and cruel, hands firm as rough as they try to drag her into the eternal nothing. She wants to crush him, curse his name, and never let him go again.

Idiot, Zabuza taunts. He's the only one she can't see, and his voice is the clearest, coming from right behind her. She can feel the heat of him on her back, solid and sturdy, and she sobs because she knows it isn't real.

She runs.

Ryuishi runs and runs and runs, and she never sees Kisame come out of a side hall like an angry bull, sporting a split lip and a bloodied nose. He slams into her like a freight train, and they both go flying before skidding across the ground. She feels her whole body shake from the strain of her endless exercise and desperate sprint while his arms wrap around her.

The memories swim around inside her head like a sickness, and his hands feel like miniature suns on her skin. She's freezing, and she finally gives in, clutching to his shoulders and hiding her face in his chest. She knows she's losing it.

"Please," she begs, hating the way tears have begun to run down her face. "Please, please, make it go away."

He holds her then, shaking and scared, and he doubts. This isn't the symptoms of an addict, or someone slipping out from another's control. This is fear and psychosis, and it isn't right. She was supposed to get better when she came, be happier and learn the truth, not be crippled by fear and anger.

"Shhhhh," he soothes. "It'll be alright."

She hiccups, and he wonders how much longer the others will want to push this. Three weeks, and it's already far too much. They have made a grave mistake, because she was mad before, but this isn't what he thought would happen. He never thought without the medicine she would revert into a trembling mess of a person, unable to tell the difference between reality and the conjurings of her mind. He didn't think she would be broken this badly. It needs to end.

He runs a hand over his head and feels her chakra bubble around them, so thick and unnatural even Samehada would hesitate to consume it. The truth has been in front of him as long as she has been able to form jutsu, and he just didn't separate it out from the rest.

"Kisame, *please*," she implores, and he holds her just a little tighter, a little more secure.

"It'll be alright," he says again. "I'm going to make it alright."

Itachi watches from the shadows as his partner, bruised and bloodied, wearily walks back with the escaped prisoner in silence.

There is a shroud of something heavy that hangs over the two of them, a mingling of desperation and determination. Tear tracks once more line the woman's cheeks, and there is a wildness about her eyes. She clutches with a sort of crazed fervor to his partner's hand, as if it is the only thing in the universe grounding her to this moment in reality, no matter how much she refused to even spare a glance in the swordsman's direction not a day ago.

This is how the mountain bows to the wind, he thinks. Slowly, one pebble blown away at a time.

The gradual decline is something he knows is occurring, but he never imagined the results to be so pronounced, so dramatic and obvious. The Rakki Ryuu was a master of shadows, and it seems so astounding that her cracks would be so obvious, the seams just beneath the surface pulling apart and revealing jagged edges sharp enough to cut. The more it continues, the harder he finds it to watch, and the more urgency he feels to rectify it.

Until now, he thought he was the only one in the entire organization that questioned withholding the white pills she swore she needed to function. Everyone seemed dead set on breaking her free from their grasp for one reason or another, convinced her dependence was the result of an addiction, or manipulation, or that she would be easier to mold to their will without them, but the only one who was entirely pleased with the results wasn't supposed to be around to witness them.

He eyes the blood stains streaking across the walls outside her door, staring stonily at the shreds of silver hair and pulpy splatters of coagulating protein. Hidan was supposed to be overwhelmed by missions, far away from this particular base, but he seems drawn for one reason or another, always bearing the faintest hints of a legitimate excuse to be here. He revels in the strange, unnatural quality of her chakra, and seems dead set on drawing it out. He seems to want to hurry along her slips and stumbles, provoke her panic attacks and flashbacks. To what end, Itachi is unsure, but he knows it cannot be good.

"Itachi," Kisame calls out, and he turns toward his partner silently. He watches him gently maneuver the tired woman around, taking painstaking care to not move too suddenly. There is regret in those small silver eyes, regret and determination.

"You can rest. I will take your shift," his partner tells him, and Itachi is satisfied to see the guilt on the other man's face. He is beginning to realize what an utter and complete fool he has been. Unfortunately, the satisfaction is as hollow as the emptiness in the woman's eyes, and he knows that he must act swiftly if he wants to see even the shade of the person she once was.

He owes her a debt. Five infants, one young genin, and a lost and lonely boy. She came and saved them when no one else would, stood beside him when his path was full of shadows, and she chased them away.

In return, he watched over one man, but it's not enough. Not when the woman herself is being consumed by the darkness.

"Ah," he answers, leaving his partner behind. He has work to do, and now is his first opportunity in weeks.

This is how Itachi finds himself on a balcony in the rain, for all the world appearing as if he is meditating. It's how a lone crow soars above the rain and the storm clouds, high above, and makes its way east, a seal inked onto its chest, its eye crimson red.

They always said that crows were ill omens. It's unfortunate that this time, it will be true.

The tapping on Kakashi's apartment window echoes cacophonously through the cluttered den.

The man himself barely registers it, as sleep-addled and focused as he is. His lone grey eye is gummy from not blinking, and his mouth

tastes like stale convenience store chips and overly greasy takeout food that sits poorly on his spoiled digestive system.

He peels his gaze away from the file in front of him the same moment Zabuza startles awake at the noise, sending the papers covering his face fluttering through the air. A stack of books and photographs that stood next to him is taken out with an errant wheeling arm, and it crashes to the floor.

Distantly, Kakashi envies the man. Sleep has eluded him lately, and his dreams are dark places. Images of Obito's crushed corpse intermingle with the sound of her wailing, and the feel of her caved ribs against his hands. Sometimes, he sees Rin as she was in her last moments, taken by the Kiri-nin, only the enemy ninja melt into cloaked figures, and Rin's skin become too dark, her hair too long. His failures haunt him, and in the dark of night, they remind him that he could lose Watanabe just like he has lost everyone else.

Zabuza directs his tired eyes toward the ruins of the tower and blinks blearily for a moment before his gaze follows Kakashi's own, staring at the avian silhouette on the windowsill. It's surprising he can still move, considering how hard the man has been pushing lately. He's been relentless, training or researching, only pausing to check on the children. The man hardly eats, and he's a tireless machine with one purpose.

His ward is much the same, and though Kakashi has been training his students diligently, the young Haku has begun to drill them as well. He's as fast as they come, with an alarming accuracy, but he's no heavy hitter. Day in and day out, the boy wakes, studies, drills, and teaches. The routine is steadfast, and the bonds between the children are growing even stronger. At this point it might as well be a four man cell with two jounin teachers.

Tenzō has been left no slack either, and in the wake of Danzo's death, he's been pushed to gather the sectors of Root agents and trainees and integrate them into Konoha... somehow. Strangely enough, there seems to be a windfall of information on how to make

them able to function normally in a new field of study led by none other than Orochimaru. Though Tenzō remains rightfully wary, he won't turn away any lead he can get. The remaining soldiers need all the help anyone can offer.

It's been a restless few weeks, a tireless search for information and whereabouts. There has been endless training on top of study on top of stress. The Sannin themselves are run ragged by it the gauntlet of politicking and shadow play. The peaceful facade must be kept until the Chuunin Exams end and the rest of the foreign dignitaries leave, or all hell will break loose.

The break in routine is welcome, a breath of fresh air in the chaos.

Zabuza blinks slowly. "Is that...?"

Kakashi's heart picks up pace, excitement flooding his veins. It's been weeks since the first message came, and hope had been dwindling.

"I'll get it!" Tenzō declares loudly, slap-happy from exhaustion. He scrambles out of the kitchen, dropping his flash fried noodles with a wet 'plop' back onto his plate, and he scuttles around the counter to vault over the couch.

Briefly, Kakashi wonders if this is some sort of trap before the window is flung wide open and the crow stares around the room before giving Kakashi what feels like a judgmental look. He would resent the fact that a bird of all things is judging him, but his apartment is truly a mess.

When Misaki had said she would help, she did not mean that she would recite the vague clue given to her by Ryuishi. No, she meant that she would begin to unravel the web that the other woman had been spinning around Konoha, and the rest of the Elemental Nations, for many, many years.

What started with a list of Misaki's assigned duties became a crash course a remarkable system that had been built up over the past decade. It's no longer a mystery why Konoha never noticed its existence before, because it was tailor made to go unseen by a woman who seemed to have an uncanny knowledge of how to gather intelligence.

The key was in the details, which wouldn't be a problem if there weren't so many of them. The variables that she seemed to account for went on for ages, and Kakashi now knew more about chuunin he never met than he ever really wanted to. Every rumor and gossip on the street became a thread in a tapestry that wove around the village and extended outward to the continent at large.

It begins with the poor, the neglected and the young. That is where Ryuishi gains her footholds; with the discontent. She wheedles her way in as nothing more than a rumor herself, a bedtime story for those without hope or prospects. She starts small, and astoundingly enough, most of what she does is free.

She first teaches them how to survive, how to live and thrive in their environment. She grants skills that allow the base population to grow, creates a sense of community. Offers goods and services, and she provides opportunities to return the favor, but never demands it be returned. However, if it is, even more opportunities arise, and it becomes a chaotic sort of ladder that anybody can climb, or if not, they can pick a step and rest there.

The Mumei, he discovers, is a blanket term. Technically, Misaki is not part of the Mumei, a tribe of people that cross the continent like ghosts, stopping here and there, living off the land. Misaki belongs to a separate chain of the information network that springs from brothel workers, who have become something of a respected group in the underworld. Apparently, there is a more business-focused sector as well, dealing with an astounding amount of resources and profits.

The crow, however, seems to care for none of Kakashi's careful sorting, and it beats its wings hard enough to send up a storm of

papers. He watches them flutter around like rectangular snow, and despairs the loss of several days worth of work.

When the papers finally settle, and Uchiha Itachi is standing in the center of his apartment, he finds that his despair quickly mutates into wariness, and the papers don't really matter at all. Especially when he wears a cloak bearing the same red cloud he has learned to loathe.

Zabuza snarls, and the man acts so fast even Kakashi is impressed, darting forward in attempt to subdue the Uchiha, but his take-down goes haywire when his body slides right through his opponent's. He stumbles through empty air, and the projection of the Uchiha blinks in apathy.

Impressively, he isn't even fazed. There isn't even a hint of embarrassment when he whirls back around, his expression livid.

"Where is she?" he growls.

The specter does not answer.

" *Where is she?*" Zabuza growls again, louder this time, more threatening than before. Kakashi is reminded not for the last time that this is the same man that defected from his village and became a missing-nin in an effort to locate her, and there is almost nothing out of bounds for him.

The silence is stifling.

"Not here," it finally responds, after a pause. "Apologies, when projecting over such a distance, there can be a delay when the link is first established."

"Itachi?" Tenzō breathes, and the projection's head swivels around to look at the man his teammate has become. It is a strange reunion, as so many seem to be these days.

"You look well, senpai," Itachi acknowledges, as blank faced as an empty piece of paper.

"You look... grown," Tenzo says, equally as expressionless. The underlying tension is thick, because this is the boy that was once part of their team. The boy that defected and turned away from the cause to commit heinous acts.

Only, Kakashi is beginning to think that description once fit another missing-nin he knew, and there is always an underneath to the underneath. He's missing variables, and the truth is a lot more subjective than he once thought.

"Why are you here?" snarls Zabuza, and Itachi turns back to glance at him. It's an impressive design, a seal tied to a summons to carry on a conversation when a message will not do. There needs to be thought involved, and though he isn't really here, the man standing in the center of the room has his full attention.

"I am in need of supplies I cannot collect on my own," the mirage says flatly.

"What?" Kakashi asks, finally making himself known, and Itachi turns to him. His stare is hollow and dead, the look of a seasoned veteran. It is not something he enjoys seeing from the face of a boy he once taught.

"A collection of small, opalescent white pills," the young man elaborates, and Kakashi furrows his brows. That is an oddly specific request, and he can't think of what the man is talking about. But it would appear that Zabuza can.

The swordsman goes stone-still, and there is a flash of muted guilt and self loathing before it crosses back over into fury. His fist clenched by his side, and Kakashi idly worries about the his apartment. He doesn't want to explain why he has a fist shaped hole in the wall to his landlord.

"It's been weeks. By now it's too late," he rumbles.

The tension in the room rackets up to even higher levels, and Kakashi wonders what could provoke such a reaction. Obviously it has something to do with a certain missing person, and the fact that they are discussing medication is a bit concerning. Also, too late for what?

Thinking about it a bit harder, he does recall something fitting the given description. It's been years now, but he it was the first time they had met properly and he had taken her into custody. Things were different, everything had been strained. He remembers restraining her to a cot, her insistence on getting medication from her pack, urgent despite her awful state. She'd been sick and shocky at that point, delirious and in the midst of some sort of attack.

"What do you require them for?" Kakashi asks leadingly. The question can be taken several ways, which is its entire purpose.

Itachi's image seems to inspect him very closely in the following seconds. Kakashi uses every ounce of false calm he has ever learned in that moment, and it turns out to be quite a lot. After all, this isn't the first time he has had a dangerous criminal seek him out in his own home.

"So that they may be used as they were intended," Itachi answers, equally as cryptic.

It's a standoff. Itachi will not reveal their use, and Kakashi won't reveal his own ignorance. There is no trust between them, not anymore.

"Is Watanabe sick?" Tenzo wonders, breaking the silence hesitantly.

"I thought you knew," Zabuza states, and he looks irritated, as if this is ground he is not sure he should tread. His anger lies just beneath the surface, and his muscles are taut, stretched and ready to snap. "She told you why she went to Orochimaru."

Just like that, the reality of the situation sinks in, and that suspicion and dread turns into muted horror. Kakashi suddenly understands why Zabuza said it would be too late, and why he is furious. Thinking on it, he himself is furious as well.

You know where I went when I was alone and crazy? When I couldn't tell the difference between reality and hallucination? he hears her say.

There was more than one reason she defected. She admitted it to a room full of people that she had gone mad, that she had lost herself in war and conflict, trying to find out what to do. Until now, it seemed like a trivial detail, another traumatic event of the past that stopped once Orochimaru spirited her away.

Now he realizes it never stopped, realizes that the little white pearl he saw is the unseen string holding her together. A tiny, unnoticed detail that could ruin everything.

"What is her condition?" Kakashi demands, and the Uchiha is too good to have any tells. There is no flicker of emotion, no hesitance or anger at the demand. There is only an impassive readiness.

"You came here to us for a reason. You could have gone right to the source, Orochimaru himself, but you came here," Kakashi says, his patience wearing thin. The already short time-frame has run out. There is no stopping the impending fallout of her fail safes now, no clever tricks she can pull to save the day. It's up to them to stop it and help her.

"She is nearing the end of detoxification. Her mental function is severely impaired," he says stonily.

"I'm going to kill him," Zabuza promises darkly, and it goes unsaid who exactly he is going to kill. Kakashi was working under the assumption that the third member of their unit was something of a self-righteous ponce, but now it is a fact.

"I believe the opposing party was operating under the assumption that she was being manipulated and controlled by her co-founder," Itachi informs the group, almost apologetic.

"That doesn't matter," Zabuza snaps. "He has betrayed her in every imaginable way. There is no undoing what he has done."

"You're wrong," Tenzō interjects softly. "She got well again once, and she can do it again."

There are no other words from anyone, and the silence is telling, especially from the messenger. He's the only one who has witnessed her state recently, and the fact that he has contacted outside assistance reeks of distress.

"She needs to be brought back to safety," Kakashi concludes after the quiet. His voice is soft, dangerously so. She needs to be brought back here to heal and then everyone can begin to piece the puzzle she left behind.

"I cannot break her free," Itachi explains, as if he had already considered doing so and then rejected the idea for being impossible. It speaks volumes about the way she is being held as well, if a man Kakashi knows can disappear without a trace cannot escape them.

"Then tell us where she is," Zabuza commands. The ' *so we can do it ourselves* ' goes unsaid.

"You misunderstand. There are far too many parties interested in observing Watanabe Ryuishi as she is now, parties neither you nor I could hope to defeat in combat," Itachi says blandly. "The only way retrieval could occur is if an army was brought over."

"The so be it," he says, and this comment seems to be something of a sore spot for the other man. His brows furrow just the slightest, and his lips downturn.

"Do you know that she has flashbacks, Momochi-san?" the Uchiha says softly. "That she calls out your name, and Hoshigaki's, and she searches frantically in her empty cell for cover?" The raven haired man turns to look at the towering swordsman fearlessly. His bearing is that of the spider before it strikes, the unmoving quality of stone.

"You were in an army once, with her beside you. Do you see what it has done? Your unit commander does. He sees the way she reflexively flinches when he moves too fast, and the way violence has left its mark on her skin. Tell me, do you think she would appreciate one coming for her? Or do you think she would regress even further, into that feral state where she cannot tell friend from foe?" he says.

"I don't care," Zabuza replies coldly, and Kakashi knows that he is not lying. The man truly would start a war for the sake of her retrieval if he could. The way things are looking, he may not even start it, only hasten it along.

"She does," Itachi says. "Even now she does. Tell me, who is Suikami, and why does she say his name when she has nightmares?"

This time the man does flinch, but he doesn't back down. If anything, the name strengthens his resolve, and he stands taller than before. "The dead are dead. This is about the living. Suikami cannot come back, but she can."

Itachi looks a touch disgusted. "You would ask the shattered fragments of a person to bear this?"

"I would bear it," Zabuza says.

Kakashi coughs, loudly. There is no need for this sort of display here and now, and it's not helping anything. It's not like they have these hypothetical armies standing by, ready to move out. Unless that is one of her fail-safes... Zabuza *did* get reinstated by Kirigakure. It's actually a bit worrying now that he thinks about it. There's Oto to

consider as well, and-no, he can't deal with that right now. It's too much to contemplate.

The two spare him a glance, but Tenzō sends him a discreet thumbs up. His kōhai's support isn't entirely necessary, but he does appreciate it. At least he wasn't alone in thinking that they were straying from the point.

"The pills, I don't have them," Kakashi admits, and Itachi's face turns blank once more, retreating back towards the topic at hand. As one the room eyes the one most likely to have access to them, and the one who is most adamant about retrieving the person they would be given to.

Zabuza takes their glares impassively, undaunted by the weight of their expectations.

Tenzō begins, "Zabuza-

"One last thing," he cuts in, and he levels his stare at the man in front of him, gauging the projection. "How old were you when she met you?"

"Eleven," Itachi says without pause, and Zabuza nods only once, his hand reaching down into the fold of his hakama pants. His fingers close around something within, and he pulls free a scroll. A pulse of chakra, and it unfurls, releasing a cloud of smoke and a familiar, tattered backpack.

With something like envy, Kakashi watches the other man run his fingers along the seams and pockets, trailing across seals and worn fabric. He pauses over one, and it snaps open with another application of chakra. It's a sign of how much she trusted him, allowing him access to the inside of her bag. It's not something he knows of any other person having.

"She never had any sense when it came to trusting adults," Zabuza starts, pulling a simple metal case from the pocket. It is such a small,

deceptive thing, looking like it belongs in the pocket of a particularly savvy merchant than in the bag of a political leader. The waterproof lining is chipped, but still intact enough to keep moisture out. The flick of a finger opens it, and inside a number of gleaming spheres rest, jumbled in rows on the cloth interior. Zabuza snaps it closed, and he holds it in his hand for a moment, staring at the hard exterior.

"But she has a reliable habit of picking out good kids," Kakashi finishes, thinking of the clues left behind. The peers and adults she has chosen to associate with have all doubted her, and there is a complicated factor in every one of the relationships. The children she chose to mentor, though, they have remained loyal to her teachings at their core, even when she has strayed.

If she sought out Itachi when he was a child, then she saw something in him, the same way she saw something in Naruto and Haku. Something that others may not see, but it has proven itself to exist. He stands here in a den full of enemies for her sake, not his own.

It strikes him in that moment how many people have come together, drawn in by just one woman. Even in her absence, nations move to react, and the lines between enemy and allies blur so much that they become obscured completely.

Somewhere, he knows she is out there. It aches to know that he is already doing all that he can, and that the woman who brought together so many people is falling apart. The cost is too high, and he isn't willing to pay it. He cannot take another loss.

Hold on, he prays. Hold on, Ryuishi.

AN: So, double update, because beta is awesome. I really wanna thank them, because this helps bring things back up when they were very, very dark. Admittedly, it's not going to be a simple straight forward thing, because, you know, Ryuishi. I

also wanna say that everybody is going to face some shit, and some things are gonna happen. Vague because reasons.

Peace be with my lurkers, faver's, and followers. Blessing be upon my reviewers, along with delicious snacks.

ALL HAIL THE MIGHTY ENBI, WHO IS SOLELY RESPONSIBLE FOR ALL THE DOUBLE UPDATE'S YA'LL GET.

Question: How is Kisame gonna deal now? OR What the fresh hell is Hidan talking about?

In Which There is a Culmination of Sorts

I do not own Naruto, or Starset.

It's funny, if Obito thinks about it.

Watanabe Ryuishi collected all the political strength in the world; she made the daimyo themselves cower before the might of her economic empire. She toed the line of legality just enough to become functionally untouchable by the upper echelons of the Elemental Nations, but was loved by the underworld as the shining example of what it could produce. Nobles both loathed and required her, and in the night, lowborn mothers told their bastard children the story of how a whore's daughter was chosen to be the vessel of the divine.

The woman standing in front of him is almost unrecognizable from the woman they brought in little more than a month ago. Her first escape attempt seemed to herald a sharp decline of her mental functions, and the gradual slide that was observed became an steady fall. The panic attacks came more readily, the confusion and psychosis almost hourly. She didn't seem to sleep more than a few hours at a time, and eventually, her ability to hold a coherent conversation eroded away entirely.

Now her narrow eyes track the movement of things only she can see, and she hovers between phases, caught between choices. At times, she seems almost lucid, observing the scene around her with a sort of taciturn wariness, but it shifts like the sands of a desert, and there are others caught inside, dragged out to the surface.

It's ironic that the one who should have known better never saw it at all. Her so called unit commander had come to him, grave and serious, and said that they were wrong, that she needed the pills.

Obito had hemmed and hawed for show, but the irony was too great. The man had actually thought they were doing the best for her.

There is no good, not for her, not here. She remains the way she is because even when offered a way out, she rejected them. She gets to remain alive because there are secrets that will slip out once they get her talking again, and because Kisame has a soft spot for her. Still, he'll play his part and go and see her sorry state for himself.

He's been cataloging the changes in his spare time as a hobby anyway.

Obito knew that when they dragged her in that there was a spark of anger in her. He knows now that he was wrong, and there isn't a spark, but a roaring wildfire inside, burning bright and furious. She loathes so much, and she snarls and spits, aiming to hurt and maim. In those moments she truly is a monster, driven by her hatred.

Other times, she seems to cling Kisame like a limpet, afraid and desperate not to be left. She holds on to him like a child, grasping for any sign of safety or affection. She's terrified, deeply and terribly unsettled by her surroundings and the thoughts inside her head.

Then there is the manic glee she holds, and Obito is the most wary of these moods. In her anger she is rash and violent, but her glee is a terrible thing. Her laughter is loud and free, and nothing can hold her down. She drifts like the wind, and her bitter joy gives her just enough of an edge to say the right words or act the right way to pull free of her watchers and scurry out for a quick moment of freedom. Three times she has escaped now, and every time since the first has been a display of cruel joy. He dreads the moment Hidan finds her like this, because their happiness is a terrible thing.

It is a small blessing that most of the time she seems content to drift, softly singing to herself in a mix of languages, her spirit vacated from her body, her mind wandering far away. Her emotions run fast and extreme, but her default is tolerable enough. Her voice is pleasant, and she doesn't seem to mind anything at all in this state, so long as

she can keep her hands busy and hum, rocking back and forth gently wherever she may be.

Where she happens to be right now is sitting in the corner of her cell, idly picking at the threads of her oversized shirt. She's clean at least, because she can bathe herself and minor other things, but rather than continue acting as a functional human, she retreats to somewhere else, singing her little songs.

" They're all around me, circling like vultures,

They want to break me and wash away my colors.

Take me high and I'll sing, you make everything okay, okay, okay- " she whispers under her breath, and Obito thinks that her position is a smart choice, from a combat viewpoint. She's protected on either side by a solid stone, and any attacker must come at her from the front if they wish to engage. Even now she reacts instinctively, fighting a battle no one else can see.

"That's a pretty song," he says.

Her eyes dart up ever so briefly to take him in before she looks down, her fingers tugging a bit more insistently at a particular string. He doesn't miss the way she flinches at the sight of him.

" We are one in the same, you take all of the pain,

Away away away, " she breathes, ignoring him. He doesn't take any offense. If he couldn't tell the difference between dreaming and waking, he would ignore a lot as well.

Secure in his sense of safety, and his ability to subdue her should it come to that, he steps closer, caging her in. His shadow covers her, and she looks so very small for somebody who holds so much power. So very... human.

She tenses as he approaches, her muscles coiling in preparation for an attack her mind tells her is coming. Her soft singing becomes a wordless humming as he leans in, crouching low to approach her on her own level. It's the same way he would approach a wild dog, or a feral animal.

"I wonder what it's like," he muses, cocking his head to the side. Her eyes sweep upwards again, and he notices that they are dark enough to be mirrors. He sees himself reflected in the pools of black, his orange mask the only spot of color in the dreary room.

He really does find these bases boring. If he had his way they would be far more vibrant, but criminals are curiously opposed to suitable decor. The whole group seems to prefer this dull, monochrome grey. In a way, it fits, but it is also maddeningly plain.

"What does it feel like to be led here by someone you once loved? Do you love him still?" he asks her, and she seems to be getting quieter, but the words come back.

" Take me over the walls below,

fly forever, don't let me go,

I need a savior to heal the pain,

When I become my worst enemy, enemy, enemy, " she murmurs softly.

"What language is that?" he wonders, reaching out to touch the braid in her hair. It's neat and combed through, tied together with a single piece of string. Idly, he wonders if she did it herself, or if Kisame has more skills than he lets on. "Did you make it up?"

Maybe he should have made up his own language, but Madara had no time for that. Or rather, Madara left him no time for that. It seems that Orochimaru had other ways of training though, and looking at the scar on her throat, he wonders if Madara's was kinder. At least

that miserable bag of wrinkled skin never scarred him like that. His scars are wounds healed over to give him new life, not brands of ownership.

She stops singing, and in the silence, they stare at each other. Her glazed eyes seem to sharpen and focus, and he sees a rare second of lucidity cross her features. There is recognition, but more importantly, there is a fierce, burning anger.

"Oh?" He shifts with anticipation. "Have you come back?"

She leans in close, and he readies himself. Intangibility is quite the skill to have at times like these.

However, she doesn't go for his throat. She leans in to put her lips next to his ear, and he feels the wash of her breath across his skin, and he can smell the soft scent of seawater on her even though the nearest ocean is a country away.

"Rin would *weep* if she could see you now," she whispers, and he suddenly feels a wash of ice course through his veins, and he freezes with the force of it. He hears a sound get caught in her throat, the faintest chuckle, and it builds and grows until she is laughing so hard she has to lean her head against his shoulder to steady herself. Her skin is like ice, and the faint bubbling of her chakra makes him feel ill.

Obito shoves her away from him so hard her skull thumps up against the wall behind her, and the laughter cuts off abruptly as she bounces off the stone with a crack. The whine from her throat is a piteous thing, but he doesn't quite care if she is damaged right now.

" *You*, " he says in a thunderous voice. He wants to say more, but the power of speech has left him. He's overwhelmed by anger and shock. If there was one thing in the world he never expected to hear, it would be that.

There is no way she should know that name. No way she should know anything at all. She's half delirious and in full blown psychosis, and yet there is no doubt that was a pointed jab aimed at him.

Suddenly he is furious, because nobody knows who he is. Nobody *should* know, anyway. The boy he used to be is thought to be dead, left to rot half crushed beneath tons of rubble. No one came looking for his body, nobody came to dig him back up and bury the pieces at home. Even the organization believes he is a different person entirely. To them he is Madara, the legacy of a bygone age, with experience and history on his side. The only person in the world who knows Uchiha Obito still lives is Zetsu, and he wouldn't tell anybody.

There is no way she could know.

He tries to justify it, try to explain it away. The ramblings of a mad woman who babbles constantly. Bakakashi could have told her the story of his team, and she could have hit upon the memory of it in that second. But why Rin specifically, and why would she weep for a stranger in an orange mask?

No. She knows. She knows, and she shouldn't.

He stares down at her, and behind his mask he sneers. How *dare* she bring up that name. How dare it even pass her filthy lips. There's no reason she should be saying these things, no reason she should have that information, and definitely no reason to keep the facade any longer.

"What do you know?" he growls at her, and she curls in on herself. Her hand raises up to prod gently at the back of her head, and when they come back, her fingers are stained red. She seems entranced by the sight of the viscous crimson fluid, her pupils dilated and her mind gone somewhere else.

He moves forward, gripping her shoulders painfully in his hands. He doesn't need her somewhere else, he needs her here and now, to

answer his questions. Obito doesn't care what sort of episode she's having, this is more important.

"What do you know?" He shakes her for emphasis. She freezes, her muscles tightening and her breathing coming in short, shallow pants. She struggles, and he sees her fight for every word.

"Reality is hell," she says, her voice quavering, and the answer takes his breath away. There is no one on earth who should know what Madara said to him. No one was there save for him and the old man, not even Zetsu. Now that Madara is dead, only he remains, and only he should know.

"Aberration," he hisses, and her chakra goes wild. It bursts out like slime, oozing around in the air. It smothers them both, and he can feel it prickling against his skin. Behind him, he can hear pounding on the door, but his focus remains on her. The others can wait.

"I want to show you something beautiful," she sing-songs, and the chakra twists, lashing around them. He feels something invade his senses like a parasite, a reaching tendril with a will of its own, and he doesn't hesitate to activate his Mangekyō Sharingan, regardless of the consequences.

The tendril latches on, and his eye spins. Their chakra mingles, and they both scream at once.

The world around them melts. Like wet paint, the image of the room around them begins to drip down, hitting the spinning edges of his Mangekyō and mixing together. He hears the sound of their mingled cries in the distance, but it is overwhelmed by faint whisperings and the vacuum-like silence that rushes to overtake them.

The room is gone, replaced by a world of shifting colors stretching forever into eternity. A technicolor nightmare spun from madness, and he can't tell the difference between above and below, right or left. It's always moving, rippling and changing.

Shades begin to form, the faint silhouettes of people that aren't there. They whisper to one another, memories overlapping and jumbling together, and he cannot tell where one ends and another begins. One leans over him, and it writhes, as if unsure what form it should take. It's made of nothing more than wisps of smoke and bits of shadow compressed together, shifting and attempting to break free. It has no mouth, no eyes or ears, but it moans wordlessly at him.

He turns his head this way and that, looking desperately for a way out of this madness, but the room has been peeled away. There are no floors or walls or ceiling, only an undulating mass of colors intersped with tendrils of emptiness that makes him sick to look at. More and more shades begin to gather around, formless and undefined, crowding him in. It's suffocating, the way they all merge and shift, and he shoves them away in a frenzy of limbs.

There is a burst of laughter, a flash of color dancing between the phantoms, and he chases it instinctively. The blobs around him groan, rumbling and hissing intelligible things, trying to pull him back. Obito keeps pushing and striking, desperate to get away, but no matter how far he goes, more appear.

"You will be the Saviour of this world while I sleep," Madara's voice booms, and he cringes when hearing it after so long, even as warped and distorted as it is. Again, the childish laughter resounds in the chaos, and he knows he has to follow it.

"He killed her!" screams a shade, and it draws his attention. It wears the likeness of Watanabe as she was, if somebody took her reflection in a mirror and shattered it with their fist. She is an image in broken glass, all jagged edges and cracks. Pieces and parts are missing, revealing the phantom underneath, but half of her face remains, along with the rough definitions of a body made from shards. "You fell for it-hook, line, and sinker!"

"You're toxic. You don't know what to do in a safe place," murmurs another specter next to him, and he's sure that it has the distinctive

red lines of the Toad Sage crawling down its face. The other phantoms around it begin groan, weeping and gnashing their teeth, flocking around the both of them.

Obito hurries along, frantic. He dares not look behind him, only ramming his way forward as fast as he can. The form leading him flickers, seems to grow and shrink. One moment it is the ghostly image of Rin, and then it shifts into someone with curly hair and darker skin.

"You did this to us!" accuses the shattered shade of Watanabe, peering out from a mob that tries to pull her apart. He sees one of them detach her hand and try and absorb it, but the shattered pieces move, and she punches it in the face before snatching the part back. She claws her way above them, her single hateful eye tracking him. "The idiot who didn't even realize that Rin's death was staged. *Staged* . You ripped us apart, **YOU RUINED EVERYTHING, OBITO.**"

His heart beats wildly in his chest, and he spots the flash of color again, the faint image of brown hair and peachy skin.

"Statistically speaking, the revenue from the Takigakure province could supply-" babbles another specter, and he kicks it roughly aside, watching it splatter and ooze back into the miasma around them. It groans as the chaotic environment consumes it, tendrils of colors and nothingness snaking out to pollute its smoke-like body, filling it in as it tears it apart.

"I love them, I need them, please, please, please," begs another, and he ducks around it. The laughter is getting louder, and the phantoms are beginning to thin out. The raging woman wearing half a face is still somewhere behind him, struggling with the mob. She howls curses after him, threats and demands for him to come back, but he breezes farther and farther away, following the distant light emanating from the figure ahead. He doesn't notice the world changing, becoming emptier. The darkness means nothing, because he has the light of the form ahead to guide him.

The shade's frustrated scream echoes through the landscape, and the luminescent figure whirls to face him. It flickers-Rin, then not Rin-and it smiles at him, warm and welcoming, its lips moving to tell him something. He can feel it inside his soul, the warmth and compassion resonating inside of him. It feels like safety, like comfort and love, and he needs it more than he's needed anything before.

He reaches for it, his hand just inches away, and then he is falling.

The light disappears along with the shades and Watanabe. There is only emptiness and forever, a howling abyss stretching beyond comprehension. The chaos halts completely, and he falls and falls and falls. The void eats away at him, desperate to get the warmth the light gave him. He denies it again and again, because that warmth is who he is. If he gives it up, then there will only be nothing.

He struggles until he slams back into reality, his head pounding, his body singing with adrenaline.

Obito shudders, noting that his Sharingan has deactivated and his eye is leaking blood alongside his nose. He feels sick and weak, like he just overcame the flu, but he's also never felt more alive in his life.

Behind him, the door breaks open, and he belatedly realizes that Watanabe is still shrieking. He can barely hear her over the ringing in his ears, but he can feel the cold press of the stone floor he's lying on.

"What did you do?" a voice bellows, and there is suddenly a blue wall of muscle stepping over him, approaching the woman who has curled into a ball. Her hands cover her ears like she can still hear the shades whispering and the rushing of the void, and tears of blood leak from the corners of her eyes. He hears quiet murmurs and shushing, and the screaming becomes muffled by fabric as she burrows into Kisame's chest.

He can finally distinguish Zetsu's voice from the chaos. "More like what did *she* do?" It makes his stomach churn to hear it, even

though it was fine just yesterday. It was comforting even, but now everything is changing, shifting like the rippling waters of the river and the sea.

He pushes himself upwards, noting how the blood on his face shifts, running down instead of to the side. It glides across his cheek and lips, tracing the line of his chin to the throat underneath. His feet find the ground, and it is solid despite how fluid everything was just moments ago, but the room still spins around. Everything is just so slightly off, as if someone shifted everything an inch to the right, or he's running a low fever. His body aches, and his pulse is sky high, and he can't tell if that's a good thing or a bad thing.

Zetsu sneers at the corner where the two former Kiri-nin congregate. The white side seems absolutely appalled at the display of human interaction, maybe even disgusted by it, and the black side is as impassive as ever.

"Control your pet," White Zetsu says. "It's stinking the place up with its chakra."

"She's sick," Kisame growls, turning to glare at the man. "I told you, she needs those pills."

"I bet she'd shut up if you just used a little force," Black Zetsu suggests, and Obito can't help but hear the screams of the half-formed specter with a face like broken glass. Its words ring in his ears like an executioner's axe, and they burn inside his mind like a brand.

He needs to know.

"Zetsu," he says, and the blood dripping from his nostril slips inside his lips. He tastes iron and salt, and somehow that makes the ache in his head even worse. The screaming has tapered off, and his companion for years turns to face him, bronze eyes bright and aware.

"Madara."

"Liar," the woman interrupts. She stares up at the both of them, her sclera tinged red, and her lips painted crimson. Her hands clutch at Kisame's arms, and he stares at her with a confused expression, his brow furrowed. "Not Madara. Obito. Obito and Bakakashi and-"

" **Hoshigaki, put a muzzle on her or I will**," Black Zetsu snaps. The white side has narrowed its eye, and bares its sharp teeth. Both of his hands are clenched into fists, and Obito would say that the two look... uneasy.

"What does she mean, not Madara?" Kisame says slowly, drawing the woman in his arms closer. He rises, and she keeps talking, babbling away secrets she shouldn't know, her voice barely muffled by his shirt. The blood runs down her face, trickling down the column of her neck.

" **She's mad** . How should I know what she means?" Zetsu returns waspishly, fluctuating between voices.

Obito turns over in his head the things he has learned and finally says, "Why was Rin specifically targeted by Kiri?"

"Not now. There are other things-" the man tries to defend, but the woman raises her voice to speak over him.

"-Sharingan and Rinnegan and the Sage and the moon. A mother's will made manifest, a nursery broken-"

Each word is an ominous portent. They draw the attention of Zetsu, who whips back around to face her. For the first time in his life, Obito witnesses absolute fury cover Zetsu's features on both sides of his face. Black and White are in united in their intense anger in a way he has never seen before.

" **You little bitch** ," the black side hisses, and Obito is unsettled even further. He's never heard him curse. Black Zetsu barely talks as it is,

and never so crudely.

"Watch it," warns Kisame, and Obito feels that things are spiraling out of control. There's a slipping feeling, as if the world is shifting, the scales tipping over and breaking completely. Chakra flares from everyone assembled, hanging so thick in the air that they become visible to the naked eye.

He needs to know.

"Why was Rin exactly where she needed to be for me to see her?" Obito speaks up again, but he is ignored. Another voice overrides his, drowning him out.

"-not Madara, not a clone. Just a boy and a beast. Nine for one, one for ten, and mother comes back. She comes back and then-

She looks like an evil thing, dragged up from somewhere better left alone. Her ink black hair gleams, and trails of blood smear across her cheeks and lips.

" **SHUT HER UP!** " Black Zetsu roars, and Hoshigaki is shifting around, cradling her closer with one arm while the other reaches for the sword on his back.

"What the hell does she mean, 'not Madara'? What did you do to her?" The swordsman is baring his sharp teeth at them both, hackles raised.

Obito echoes that question in his own mind. Why was Rin exactly where she needed to be? If Madara gave control of Kiri over to him, wouldn't that imply he had control before as well? The Kiri-nin were oddly specific about who they grabbed. It could have been anyone else. There were tons of other targets they could have chosen. Using the student of the Yellow Flash was asking for trouble, positively begging to be noticed.

"What did you do to her?" Obito echoes, his voice a desperate whisper.

"What are you two even doing? Look at yourselves," Zetsu says scornfully. "She's insane, babbling nonsense."

"Mama. Ka-gu-ya," she chants, and that seems to be the last straw. Despite all his words, Zetsu lunges for her, his arm outstretched like a knife.

Kisame snarls, ducking beneath the blow and pressing off the wall with his sandaled foot, racing towards the exit. Obito doesn't even try and stop him, too stunned to react in time. His mind is stuffed full of the implications of everything that was said and done.

" I'm going to erase you from this world," Black Zetsu booms, and for once he seems to take the lead, dragging his other half along. The plant encasing his shoulders sinks down for speed, and he darts after the fleeing figures, leaving the Uchiha alone in the room.

Slowly, the blood from his face pools around the edges of his mask. It gathers thick enough to form a droplet, and it catches his eye when it falls downward, separating from the rest.

An hour ago, he was sure of his place in the world, was ready to confront a madwoman and continue on his way. He knew his cause, his reason for doing everything, knew how his teammate betrayed him and the girl he loved. But now, he isn't sure of anything.

The stench of her blood is overwhelming.

Kisame hurries through the corridors faster than he ever has before, his sword in one hand, his teammate clutched tight in the other. Truly, he probably doesn't even need to support her, because she's wrapped her legs around him and tucked her face into the crook of his neck, her arms laced around his shoulders. Her can feel the wet

press of her cool skin against him, and the sharp tang of iron coats his senses like a terrible reminder.

He should have never left her alone with the man in the mask, not even for a second, but he trusted him. Trusted him to see for himself that she wasn't well, that they had made a terrible mistake. This wasn't better for her, and this wasn't her acting.

Now she's crying tears of blood, and it's leaking from her nose. She's worse than ever, and it's all his fault.

"I'm sorry," he tells her, hoping that somewhere she can understand him. That somewhere the woman that he first saw is still inside. "I'm sorry, and I'm going to fix this."

She sighs against his pulse, her fingers tracing patterns on his skin, unbothered by the way she is jostled around as he runs. "Okay," she hums, as if trying out the word for the first time. She seems more settled now that they are running for their lives, ironically enough.

He takes the stairs all at once, bounding upward, ignoring the hiss of steam being released from one of the pipes. He's glad he's trained for so long, because what he is contemplating is going to require an enormous amount of strength and stamina, especially if she keeps leaking chakra like a broken sieve. It's like a beacon of their exact location, calling all pursuers in.

"Hoshigaki, stop this-she's babbling nonsense. You're right, she needs to be back on the pills," Zetsu's voice comes from somewhere behind him. It would be a tempting offer if he hadn't heard the man distinctly promise to wipe the woman in his arms off the face of the planet.

"Liar," Ryuishi returns softly, and he grunts, hurtling around a corner. Liar is right. It's funny how she can pick them out, even like this.

There is a flash of white in front of him, the the gleam of a bronze eye, and Kisame swings at it. The half-formed creature snarls as

Samehada shaves through it, gulping down chakra. He notices to his horror that it's only half a person, missing part of its skull and torso in a distinctly inhuman way. It goes down, or rather, it goes through the wall while Kisame keeps moving. Ryuishi laughs at it as he runs through the corridors.

"Quit playing games, you can have what you want. Come back," the voice calls again, even though he cut it down. The fact that it sounds closer does not bode well at all.

"Just grab our things and go," he mumbles. "In, out, quick as the Yellow Flash."

He's distracted momentarily by the slender finger running through his hair, and he grits his teeth as they smooth their way up his scalp, twinning in the strands. Now really isn't the time, but he has no one to blame for this but himself. She might be more understanding of acceptable situational behavior if he hadn't purposely destabilized after she had begged him not to.

He curses, the guilt gnawing at him, and he rounds a final corner, coming into a familiar hall. He sprints and kicks down the door to his quarters without looking, intent on grabbing enough supplies to tide them over for a little while.

He does not expect Itachi to be in his room.

Judging by the glimmer of surprise that flickers across the young man's face, Itachi does not expect him to break down his own door while carrying the prisoner he insisted on bringing in, looking ready for a battle.

"Itachi-" he goes, already lamenting this fight. Itachi is his partner, he practically raised the boy. How could he even begin to explain-

"Are we defecting?" Itachi interrupts placidly, standing up from his seat in the corner, brushing invisible wrinkles out of his clothes. He

looks perfectly unruffled and prepared, as if he knew this would happen all along.

Kisame gapes at him. "What?!"

"I assume you've come to your senses and seen that your companion will not last long in this environment, leading to a confrontation between yourself and the leader," Itachi explains.

He sputters for a moment, simultaneously relieved and bewildered. The woman clinging to his shoulders laughs softly.

"I-I mean... Maybe, but how did you-?" Kisame's question is cut short by the stream of kunai that Itachi whips out. They sail over his shoulder, and he hears the sound of blades sinking into flesh. He whirls around see what was behind him, and he understands that Itachi may have just saved his skin. It's unsettling to see what was once a malformed human shape begin to droop into a puddle of white goo, the hilt of several knives standing from what was an eye socket.

He turns back around slowly to face his young partner. "I have no plan," Kisame admits, bursting back into action and scrambling around his bed for his things. He gently gets Ryuishi to release him while he dons his gear, and she wraps herself up in his cloak, her loose ponytail draped over her shoulder.

"I do," Itachi announces, pulling a metal case from the inside of his robe. He flicks it open with his thumb, and inside are rows and rows of familiar white pills.

Kisame exhales through his nose, ignoring the implications of Itachi having those. Right now he's not going to look at this gift too closely. Itachi's a good kid, and he trusts him more than he trusts himself. Of all the Akatsuki, he was the only one to warn against bringing her in.

"I messed up," the swordsman admits, tugging on the last of his things and sealing the rest up, shoving the scroll into his pants

pocket.

"You did," Itachi agrees, shutting the case and stepping closer to examine Ryuishi's face. She smiles at him, seemingly ignorant to the way scarlet streaks run down her face from her eyes and nose. The wounds are familiar to him, but not from a non-clan member. The redness, the bleeding, the nerve strain, they are all signs of Sharingan overuse.

"Who?" Itachi asks with narrowed eyes.

"I don't think Madara is really Madara, but he still has a Sharingan, and they were alone for a few minutes. Also, Zetsu may have been playing puppetmaster," Kisame explains, outstretching his arms to haul his unit member back up. She squirms around before settling on his back, resting her chin on his shoulder and squinting out at the world.

"Curious," Itachi finally says, with all the interest of a crocodile watching the river float by. "Do you think the Ame nin know?"

"Don't know, don't care," Kisame says shortly. "But if they don't figure out that there has been foul play in their organization after this, then nothing will tip them off."

Itachi makes a contemplative noise, readying himself as his partner eyes the window in the room. It's far too small for the larger man's frame, let alone when he is carrying both his weapon and another human being.

Kisame decides the same, but also that they cannot go the way they came in. He readies his sword, and the woman on his back shivers as chakra courses through his body, filling his limbs. He lashes out, and the wall around the window crumbles, revealing a frightening precipice. It's hundreds of feet to the ground, and everything is slick with steam and drizzle. They could run down, but they need to go out rather than down. Down is a waste of time until they escape the city. Ryuishi huddles as close as she can to him, hiding away from the

chill, and it reminds him of better days. Times when he was what she needed, not a force that brought her down.

For a moment he hesitates, the wind whipping the rain over him. He turns back to the boy who came in at a mere thirteen, and he gives him one last chance. He doesn't want to screw up yet again.

"You could stay. They wouldn't blame you," Kisame tells him, because from here on out, it's a choice. He tried enforcing his will and it backfired. It's mutual or nothing now.

Itachi looks up at him, and his eyes flicker over to the woman on his back. There is a story there, Kisame realizes. He wonders if she has ever not meddled where she had the opportunity to, and where they would be if she didn't.

"I've already made my choice," Itachi says resolutely.

Kisame nods once, and only once. The truth can wait just a little bit longer, because for now, there is only escape. He suck a breath in, laments how much he hates high places, and he leaps.

The wind rushes over him, and within seconds he can feel the rain sink into his skin. The cloak on his partner's back snaps open like a pair of black wings, and they descend like hawks from the sky, streaking through the air.

"**T R A I T O R S**," a voice roars, growing in distance. A peak behind him reveals that the hole in the building is spewing out the white half-Zetsu's, and they bubble around the opening, a sea of white foam. For a moment it looks as if they are going to jump as well, but then the whole building seems to shudder and groan, thousands of tons of concrete rippling in a way that they should definitely not.

Kisame hits rooftop, and the shock of it simultaneously pains his knees and leaves a crater in the shingles. He scrambles over them as fast as he can go, hearing Itachi touch down behind him, and wonders what happened in the sublevels to make it pitch to the side

like that. Later, he will learn that a powerful ninja losing it on the base levels while they come to terms with intense emotional upheaval will generally cause destruction of that magnitude. But for now, he races to get out of the way of an entire falling tower while the Zetsu hoard scrambles around as well. A few drop off in pursuit behind while others melt into surrounding surfaces like pebbles in a pond.

The duo bounds onward, eating up the distance between rooftops, and they run like they never have before. The only thing on their minds is escape. To where, Kisame doesn't know, he just knows that the lies have followed him everywhere he has tried to go. The safe place he created turned out to be just as dangerous as the one he left, and he dragged one of the people he promised to keep out of harm's way in with him. He still doesn't think that what she was doing is the answer, but he realizes that his was no better either.

"Which direction?" Itachi asks behind him, almost inaudible over the sound of the rain and the crumbling tower behind them.

"South," Kisame answers, knowing that they will have to change it up several times to remain hidden. Zetsu is a spy of an amazing caliber, and Kisame wouldn't put it past him to have tagged every member with his spores. Hell, that's how they found her in the first place, so she definitely has them.

He decides that they'll switch it up for a few days, and hopefully make it to the coast on an offshore island where Zetsu can't follow, and then they'll wipe themselves clean. After that, they can figure out where they are really going.

"Home," whispers Ryuishi, and Kisame doesn't know it at the time, but that is exactly where the trio is headed.

AN: So we stick to one pov in this chapter, and find out what is going on in the next. Kisame learns that he done fucked up, Itachi is far to chill, and Ryuishi mind melds with her foil. Zetsu emerges as the baddest of asses, and Tobi get's thrown into an

existential crisis, the likes of which he has not seen before. From here on out the themes are going to change around a bit, but the good news is that... well, no spoilers.

Thanks to my lurkers, favoriters, and followers. I want to take a moment to seriously tone it down, dim lighting and all, and say when I thank my reviewers, I mean that shit. I seriously fucking read all the reviews, and attempt to reply to at least some every chapter. I know my serial reviewers by their sign in names, and you just... you people are my jim-jams. You keep me strong, help support me when I am weak, and when it's all dark, you help me see the light.

I also want to say thank you to enbi, who helps me when I lose my way, and holds my hand as I clumsily fumble around with things. They are #bestbeta2k5eva

Question: How badly does Tobi begin to cope? OR What the shit happens to the Akatsuki now?

In Which We Move Forward

I do not own Naruto.

For the uncountable time that night, Ryuishi fills up her hands with sand and lifts them high to feel the grains slip between her fingertips. She doesn't even seem to be watching the sand fall, just filling her palms with grains again and again to feel them empty out, and she is completely absorbed with her surroundings, staring out over the ocean with a secret smile.

The surf crashes somewhere to his side, and the fire crackles merrily next to him while his taciturn partner takes the opportunity to rest.

If Kisame closes his eyes, he can almost pretend that this isn't the result of a horrible mistake on his part, but rather a comfortable gathering of friends. He can act like they didn't scrub their skin raw to rid themselves of any spores, and that they haven't been running sporadically through the countryside for days on end without rest. That tonight isn't the first chance they have had to eat and sleep and, in her case, calmly swallow a dose of medication.

The waves crash down, and when he opens his eyes again, she's moved forward enough to put her feet in the surf. It seems sitting up became too much for her, and she lays on her side, staring impassively at him, playing with the sand.

He frowns inwardly, turning away from that gaze, and he stares the map in his hands once again. There has to be somewhere that they can go that is safe, but for the life of him, he can't figure out where.

Technically speaking, Waterfall is the best option. It's populated enough along the trade routes that they wouldn't be noticed if they kept moving. Ryuishi would blend right in with her dark skin and dark eyes, and even Itachi would do well, save for some sunburn on his

too pale skin. Kisame, however, is a one hundred and eighty four centimeter tall blue shark man with a living sword, and he sticks out like a sore thumb no matter where he goes. He also cannot imagine living in the stagnant heat and humidity of the jungle, and he knows that the trade routes were her business. It would only be a matter of time until they slipped up enough and someone recognized her for who she was.

That's not even mentioning that the country borders Fire and Grass. Fire is ignorable, because it is so big. It's almost impossible to find a nation that doesn't share at least one border with it. Grass, however, is not so ignorable. The Daimyo of Grass is well known to him, for his hatred of the Rakki Ryuu. Had he enough money or power, she would be dead ten times over by his command. The country is still boiling, at war with itself over the ideas she spread. The traditionalists hate it, and the higher classes find it distasteful, but the impoverished and young cling to them. It's a stalemate, waiting for just the right moment to turn into all-out civil war.

Ideally, Frost or Lightning Country would work. They share no borders with Fire, and Frost's ninja population is almost negligible. However, the high altitude would only exacerbate his partner's condition if they were to settle there for a long amount of time, and he cannot imagine returning to a place with snow when she hates the cold so much. There's a good chance that it would make many of her episodes worse, because so much of their time on the front lines was spent among the frozen coastlines and hillsides of those two countries.

That's ignoring the fact that Frost has become more industrialized in the past ten years as well. Their train system has become the envy of many other nations, and even now they continue to run more tracks, especially with the new Mizukage focusing on trade. Overland travel is at a disadvantage to sea trade, requiring more time and effort to move the same amount of goods even half the distance. The port cities of Steam, Lightning, Frost, Fire, and River are all thriving as Water Country takes its first steps to restabilizing,

pumping the market full of goods that have been scarce for the past several decades. Deep sea fish, seaweed derivatives, sea salts, and luxury goods come on new ships manned by multi-tasking ninja and civilians, bringing new lifeblood to forgotten areas.

If he's honest, that too has her handiwork written all over it.

He scowls at the map. The Land of Earth is big enough to disappear in, but the Akatsuki regularly did business there. It was one of their most stable above board contracts, and they could almost be considered allies. Earth is probably on the lookout for any signs of a defector trio, especially considering the bounties all of them sport.

Hypothetically speaking, Water Country would be a good place to hide. There are lots of small islands throughout the archipelago, and scavenging food and shelter wouldn't be hard at all with the skills they have. The only problem is that Kisame doesn't exactly know this new Kiri that's rising on the scene, and he has a sneaking suspicion that Ryuishi dabbled here as well. There's just too much to be left to chance, considering the both of them are still wanted criminals in that country. Zabuza may have his name cleared, but he doesn't, and as far as the world knows, she doesn't either.

The Land of Rice Paddies is strictly out of the question, for obvious reasons.

Again, he turns the problem over in his head, staring at the center of the continent. He absolutely does not want to go to Fire Country, or more specifically, Konoha. Not only did someone in Konoha sell her out in the first place, but it also put a price on his partner's head, and it remains a place full of traitorous, backstabbing people. To return to there would be like jumping out of an oncoming attack into a pit filled with vipers, praying that they don't bite.

Yes, Kisame may now count himself as a backstabbing traitor with how he treated Ryuishi, and he will do his best to undo his actions, but he can safely say he did not ever make an attempt on her life. He did not mean to put her through the hell he has, and that doesn't

excuse his actions in the least, he knows, but it does mean he had good intentions.

There is no good intention in cutting a throat. No one thinks they are doing a good thing to the victim when they slash a neck open. Returning to Konoha will be placing her right back in the hands of the snake that did that, and worse, it will be allowing that treacherous creature to come near the same Uchiha he tried to take over once already. For all he recognizes that things are more complicated than they first appear, he won't do that. Orochimaru is a danger to both of the people under Kisame's care.

He scowls, weighing the benefits and dangers of hiding out in the Mountain's Graveyard, that wild land untamed by any country or stable population. The place he'd only ever been to once, with not-Madara of all people, to reclaim the dried husk of a body with ten eyes and a grinning skull mouth. The temperature was right, and it was sparsely populated, they could move unseen, but there was something off about that place. Something wrong. The chakra was too dense, the forest too old, and the whole stretch of land felt like a battlefield.

Samehada gurgles by his side, making a displeased noise, and when he looks back up from the map, Ryuishi is staring down at the piece of paper in his hands. Her low ponytail slides off her shoulder to one side and hangs there, the tips of her hair brushing the pages.

"I want to go home," she tells him quietly.

"I'm trying," he says, not fully expecting a reply. She doesn't always respond, her attention span as short as a Kumo-nin's blade.

" *We are going home*," she states again, a little more forcefully. She sounds frustrated instead of hesitant, angry at something. She scans the map, boring holes in it with the power of her stare, and he sees the muscle in her jaw flex as she clenches her teeth. She growls as she jabs one sand covered finger to the coastline of Suna, not to far

from the border of River country. As far he knows, it's swampland, full of mangrove forests, biting mosquitoes, and little else.

"There's nothing there," he says, and she looks up at him. He sees the firelight reflected in her eyes, a warm golden glow in a backdrop of black.

"A sunny beach in the south," she corrects him, and he stares at her for a moment before the words register as familiar.

"Are you serious?" he asks her, leaning forward. He tries to gauge if she's lost in another dream world, or in some sort of episode.

"A sunny beach in the south," she repeats angrily.

"Where we could have bonfire under the stars and no one could find us," he finishes, nodding. It's an old dream, one he had almost forgotten. One she made up to bring them comfort on the battlefield, a fanciful escape tactic when reality became too much.

"Home," she stresses, pointing to that one area on the map again. He breathes out through his nose, and thinks that if there is nothing there, then it just means anyone trying to track them is all the more confused. If there is something there, then it's likely that there is a system in place to protect it already, other than the completely random and backward placing of it.

"Alright. We'll go there," he tells her, and it seems to settle her a bit. She places her cold, gritty hand against his cheek and pats him like he's a particularly smart dog who has performed a trick, before walking over to the other side of the fire and throwing herself down on Itachi, who wakes with a startled grunt.

Itachi recognizes his assaulter before the blade in his hand can sink into her skin, and he blinks as she rolls over him, nesting down in the bedding that is not hers. He turns to look at Kisame with a cold, impassive face that demands he answer why Ryuishi is dragging her damp, sandy skin into his bedroll.

Instead of answering, Kisame holds up the map, pointing to the coordinates she gave him. Itachi scowls, and he turns his back on the larger man, content to ignore him until it is his turn to take watch.

Dawn comes, and they continue onward, their firepit buried under sand and their tracks washed away by the rising tide. They take to the water, and though Itachi is skeptical, Kisame pushes them onward. The waters are cold now, and they have many days to go, but not even the best tracker in the world can follow a path that leads into the ocean. Even aerial surveillance is liable to failure due to the sheer size of it all.

Still, by the second day, they end up with a dinghy. Kisame isn't sure how, considering they haven't stopped at all, and the last place they camped had almost no population to speak of, let alone any settlements nearby.

Itachi calmly claims the small craft as his own, and Kisame takes to the water after Ryuishi, who acts as if it was never a choice in the first place. He questions the wisdom of letting her swim, but her episodes seem farther apart in the water, and she moves without pause, cutting through the currents with the same grace and poise she had when she was young, more at home in the ocean than anyone he has ever known. In fact, his biggest struggle is getting her to rest and making sure they stay on course.

Her moods come and go in flashes, mercurial and erratic. Her mental state seems better than it was inside the grey walls of her room, but it is by no means stable. She wears herself thin in the waters, fighting things he cannot see and struggling with herself. Sometimes, all he can do is watch as she screams clouds of silver bubbles into the brine, hands scratching at anything that comes close. Other times, Itachi is left to observe her as she stretches over the back of his little boat, shivering and shaking, soaked to the bone and mumbling nonsense.

The two ex-Akatsuki members do their best to contain it, and the waters eat up what they cannot stop. Her tears, her rage, her manic

laughter, the sea takes it all. The ocean around her ripples and churns, moving in response to her chakra, and even he is not safe during those times, despite his skill in water ninjutsu surpassing her own.

They keep moving despite it all. Despite the episodes, despite the currents, and despite their overall disharmony as a group.

The cool waters of Wave begin to turn into the temperate waters of River, and they melt into the warm waters of the Wind Country coastline. The sun becomes less obscured by fog and overcast skies, blazing hot and heavy overhead, and the Uchiha in their company alternately basks in the warmth and shies away from the exposure.

The temperature rises to unheard-of heights, and when they pick a piece of shoreline to rest on at nights, the forests give way to jungle, and then to rocky swampland. The first time they spot a group of mangrove trees, the woman in their midst seems to almost vibrate with excitement, and she pushes them onward for a full day and a half, running off every chance she gets and forcing them to follow.

When they finally round a towering cliffside, and a long white stretch of sand comes into view, Kisame finally understands why.

The woman swimming in front of him lets out a delighted laugh at the sight of the grand house sitting in the treeline, nestled against a backdrop of green and brown. The worn wood paneling and sunbleached deck beckons, and the great bay window glimmers invitingly. If he honestly thought about it, he expected anything they did find to be more of a compound or base, but this... this is a home. From the comfortable-looking wooden seats on the porch, to the sandblasted foundation, everything about it screams personal instead of professional.

"Wow," he breathes, and Ryuishi sends a splash back at him, treading water to make her way forward as fast as possible.

"Well," Itachi says solemnly, looking around the secluded area, his sensitive eyes shaded by his hand. "It's secluded. A single abode in the middle of a desolate wasteland. Easy enough to secure."

Kisame takes in the rocky outcroppings that are sure to be hiding delicious crabs. He sweeps his gaze over the treeline, picking out unripe starfruit and birds of all kinds, and he wonders how Itachi can call it desolate land. The sea is rich and probably full of fish and the trees are lush and green. There is fruit and water, warmth and comforts beyond imagination.

"This is paradise," he says, bobbing in the waves with a shocked expression.

Itachi sends him a baleful look from the dinghy, but moves on, intent on finding out what lies within the house. He hopes that the little pots near the window are indeed medical herbs, because his skin is starting to redden. The saltwater and sun have been merciless. He's a Konoha-nin, not a Kiri-nin, and all this water is starting to make him lose his mind. The idea of actual shelter and indoor plumbing makes him want to smile for once.

(He doesn't, but it does cross his mind.)

Itachi slaps an oar against his partner's back to break him out of his apparent reverie, and the man closes his mouth, slowly following after the two that headed forward without him.

Kisame stares as Ryuishi rises from the surf, her clothes made baggy by the sea and her wet hair a mess, and he wonders: if this is where he could have been, why did he spend thirteen years waiting in the rain?

"I'm sorry, who?"

Kakashi stares at the people gathered in the Hokage's office. Every single one of them looks on edge, worn down from weeks of putting

on an elaborate facade.

Disinformation doesn't just spread itself, and while the three men remained busy learning the basic ins and outs of the system Ryuishi had built up, gorging their minds on figures and trade secrets, the Sannin held their end of things by turning the public eye off of the disappearance of a notable visitor.

Jiraiya was a spymaster in his own right, and he earned the title twice over in the past month. Not only did he spearhead the misinformation and smokescreen campaign, but he collaborated with his teammates and gathered the last of the remaining Root agents from the fall of Danzō. While the councilman's corpse was being perfectly preserved to be revealed at exactly the right time, days had ticked away like sand through an hourglass. It had become a race to find the agents before they went rogue.

Jiraiya looks as hollow and worn as Tenzō, who stands by his side. Together the two of them had searched the labyrinthine passages that the elites had been using, gathering and cataloging evidence of Danzō's schemes at home and abroad, and subduing rogue personnel.

"Her name is Kagami, and it would be best if you addressed her as such," a sibilant voice intones.

To their right stands Orochimaru, who appears to be in the best condition out of all of them. His robes are still pressed and clean, his face unmarred by stress, but there is something brittle in his golden eyes that warns onlookers of his true state. Maintaining the attention of the entire political scene by himself must have been exhausting, especially for one who was so used to the shadows. He acted as the distraction, the bright flare that burned into life so that others would miss the action taking place behind the scenes. It had been countless nights of negotiations and treaties between the nobles and himself, and he maintained the crisp, professional image all along.

"Misaki-san has brought it to our attention that if we truly wish to avoid disaster, than the next person to address should be Watanabe's mother. Orochimaru agrees that this is most likely the best course of nonviolent action," Tsunade says, massaging her temples lightly. "Unfortunately, said woman has a serious distrust of Orochimaru, and this is the kind of situation you can't simply explain through messenger. That, and Misaki and Orochimaru won't tell us where she is, but has agreed to lead you three."

Tenzō furrows his brows, attempting to get the room to stop spinning. After the meeting is done, he can catch up on some sleep, and maybe even bathe, but until then he has to stay awake. "I thought her mother was dead," he says slowly, and Zabuza makes a derisive noise low in his throat.

"Wrong mother. Kagami was the brothel mother where she grew up, and for all she disliked the old bat, Ryuishi does trust her to manage the network."

Kakashi stares at him, almost sighing in exasperation. Of course he knows that there is some secret higher up in the ranks of this network, and he only now bothers to tell them that he knows about it. Do Kiri-nin keep secrets for a reason, or is it just a habit by now?

"Why do I get the feeling that Orochimaru isn't the only one she distrusts?" he says tiredly.

Zabuza doesn't acknowledge him, staring unflinchingly forward. His personal business is his own, and he isn't a Konoha-nin. He's not going to go around talking about everything.

"Kagami is part of the previous generation of Kirigakure ninja. Her mind works in... other ways," Misaki tries to say delicately.

Jiraiya snorts in understanding, ruffling his wild mane of hair. "So she believes in the caste system. She might believe that there is some movement between classes now, but in her eyes the girl she would

have gladly sold as an seduction corps agent is now on a different level than her one time peers."

"I believe it is more a matter of influence," Orochimaru corrects.

"So she doesn't like the sway other people hold over what she considers her key to success," Jiraiya amends, side-eyeing his serpentine teammate. "Speaking from a point of personal understanding, Orochimaru?"

"I simply see the logic in associating with those who would assist in furthering your own abilities and goals and limiting time spent with distractions. Which is why I never choose to spend time with the likes of *you*," the Otokage hisses in return.

"Hear that? You're a distraction, Momochi-san," Jiraiya tells Zabuza pointedly.

"Better a distraction than a snake she never trusted," he returns tonelessly.

Orochimaru sneers, revealing his fang-like incisors, and the swordsman stands just a little bit straighter, answering the unspoken challenge. He inhales, readying himself for a brawl.

"I was under the assumption that I was in a room with highly trained ninja that are jounin-level and above, not stuck inside a bird coop full of posturing roosters," Tsunade grinds out, watching the age-old signs of a dominance display. Or maybe it's a territory fight. Animal behaviorism is not her forte.

"Sometimes there isn't much difference between the two," Tenzō mutters, and she wishes she didn't agree with him.

Orochimaru, at least, seems to take the hint, but she doesn't believe for a second it's because he actually respects her authority. Rather, his own vanity was at stake. There's no way he would continue to act

like a spitting tomcat after he was called out for it. Which just leaves Zabuza, eyes cold and shoulders squared.

"The Hokage gives his blessing for Tenzō and Hatake to undergo this mission. The Kiri delegate, of course, is free to stay here-"

"I'm going," he interrupts.

Tsunade grits her teeth, continuing like he didn't just try to speak over her. She thinks of warm baths and bottles full of sake, running the images through her head to keep herself calm.

"-but it has been deemed unnecessary to involve the genin even further. They will remain under security watch inside the village. This, of course, excludes the young ward of both Watanabe and Momochi-san, whom we have no control over," she finishes.

"He'll stay here as well," Zabuza informs them, and Tsunade blinks, actually surprised. They seemed glued at the hip since the start of this. Hell, even before it all began, they were close.

Zabuza doesn't give them the satisfaction of explaining why he chooses this option, but he knows that Haku will understand. The village is safe enough for now, but should things turn sour, he has more than enough experience in stealth to guide a team out of it. He won't leave the jinchuuriki boys unguarded, and he won't let the others continue to handle her empire without him to protect what he can.

In a better world, the teams would remain intact under his watch, but this is reality.

"He is welcome, of course," Tsunade says slowly, still a bit stunned.

"Good, then we move out tomorrow at dawn," he grunts, tired of all the talk. Leaving no time for anymore words, he stalks outside the doors, going to prepare his mission pack and inform Haku of his duties.

The assembled ninja watch him leave with varying states of distaste and incredulity. His total defiance of accepted social norms like waiting for an agreement before making a decision leaves them a bit off-kilter.

"Momochi-san can be a bit... bullheaded," Misaki states carefully, her charming smile still in place. It looks only a little bit strained.

"He's actually not so bad in comparison to Watanabe, at times," Kakashi says, weighing the two of them in his head. Yes, Zabuza might suddenly decide to go off on his own, but at least he bothers to inform people of it first instead of just disappearing.

"Kiri-nin," Jiraiya huffs, and for once, Orochimaru seems to be of a similar mind.

"Kiri-nin," he agrees.

Tenzō doesn't comment, half-asleep in his seat, his head resting on the back of the chair. When he wakes, he's sure to have a crick in his neck, not to mention the stiffness he'll have in his spine.

"Get out of my office, all of you," Tsunade says bluntly, and they all oblige. Not once does anybody question the fact that it is technically the Third's office, not her own.

There is something wrong with this picture.

Standing triumphant after weeks of toil and a whole month of training should put Gaara finally at peace. He's sure to be promoted to chuunin once his father catches word of how the team has performed, and he should be savoring the satisfaction of victory. The stadium is cheering, new missions will flow into Sunagakure, and everything has worked out beautifully. He has his siblings congratulating him, has brought honor to his home, and is an excellent example of a shinobi. The one thing that ruins the whole scenario is the empty space next to the Otokage.

Aneue isn't here.

A first, he's stung, because it is petty and childish but he wanted her to support him, even if things weren't the best between them. He knows she would, because Aneue has always been there to celebrate his victories. She's the one who cheered him on when he caught his first lizard, and showered him with kisses every time he built a sandcastle.

It's that line of thought that makes him look closer. On the night he's supposed to be celebrating his win and resting after the tournament, he snoops. He molds an eye from his sand and sets it wandering through the shadows, and he creeps along the busy streets as quiet as a mouse, listening for any hint of where she may be.

Nothing. Nothing but gossip and rumors and base chatter about the tournament itself. How well the Suna and Oto teams did, filling up the slots for finalists. How the fight between Kidōmaru and Temari was the best showing, and how the rookie Konoha team did their village proud by moving all the way to finals on their first try.

He digs deeper, forgoing food and rest, gathering everything he can as fast as possible. He finds that she was seen not too long ago, always in the company of a man with one eye and silver hair, the Kiri delegate, and a troop of genin. Gaara can picture them all in his mind, the confusion they wrought, the chaos.

The next day, the sun comes early, and he confronts his siblings with the news he has gathered.

"Maybe she just went home," Temari says bluntly with a shrug, attempting to comfort him. It's a weak attempt at best, but his siblings do not hold demons inside of them and are tired from their fights. It is understandable that her temper is short.

"Yeah, wherever home is for her, " Kankuro adds unhelpfully.

Gaara frowns, because it doesn't *feel* right. She's gone, just like that, and nobody is questioning it too hard. Every time he tries to lead the conversation towards the Lady of Otogakure, he gets a rant about the latest fashions she was wearing or how wealthy the country is. He gets nothing on where she is now.

"The men would probably know," Gaara says softly, and Temari blinks at him. She narrows her eyes and crosses her arms, suddenly wary of the subject change.

"Gaara, you can't just go around asking about other ninja, especially when in a foreign Hidden Village. It's considered-well, it's really suspicious," she tries to explain. "It's one thing to inquire about a relatively gossiped-about figure, especially someone new on the political scene, because people assume you're just catching up on gossip. But asking about currently enlisted ninja has intelligence gathering written all over it."

He doesn't say anything, turning his eyes to his brother. Kankuro makes a confused face for a moment, his war paint pulling oddly at his features, before he seems to understand what is being asked of him. He groans dramatically when he figures it out.

"Nooooooooo," he whines. "I just got done being beat up by a flute-playing witch. Don't do this to me Gaara. One night in a bed does not make up for months of working my butt off."

"Aniki..."

"Ooooooh," Temari singsongs, jabbing Kankuro in the ribs. "He pulled the Aniki card. He's serious."

"Stop it," said boy pleads.

"I would like to point out that among those here, your skills at intelligence gathering are the best," Gaara says, staring unblinkingly at his brother.

Kankuro cringes away from the intense stare and honest words. He can never tell if he's supposed to be flattered or terrified when this happens. "I hate this. Your compliments are weird, knock it off."

"Without you, we would have never figured out what lay beneath Baki-sensei's turban," Gaara continues in a tone that is, for him, gracious and filled with glowing praise. "It is in recognition of this talent that I ask you to please figure out who those men are."

"No," Kankuro says flatly, turning his attention away from his little brother. Temari snickers at his side, and he shoots her a glare. She has no right to laugh at him when she herself can be suckered into just about anything for the right amount of sweet chestnuts.

"Please?" Gaara asks, leaning closer.

"No," he says, staunch in the face of the opposition.

"Please?"

"No."

"Please?"

And so it goes, because Gaara is undaunted by societal norms and human limits. Without stop, he asks again and again and again, and Kankuro knows he will cave eventually. He has to, because Gaara doesn't sleep. He doesn't really need rest, and he can wait forever, all hard stare and unblinking eyes until Kankuro wakes up a week later to the sight of his little brother leaning over his bed whispering the same word over and over.

Honestly, he kinda liked it better when he thought Gaara was a demon. At least then he just had to worry about staying out of his way when he was on a rampage. Now he has to deal with his weird obsession with the candy seller and his collections of lizards.

Kankuro gives up halfway through breakfast, because he just wants peace and quiet and maybe another apple, and he will get none of those things with his little brother invading his personal space, murmuring disturbing things under his breath.

He sets out, and the other two siblings wait for his return. It's around lunch when their brother comes back, his face sour and his lips turned downward.

"Congratulations, baby bro. The candy lady hung out with *the* Momochi Zabuza of the Seven Swordsmen, *and* Sharingan no Kakashi. She's got some A-lister friends, and none of them are out and about," Kankuro informs them both, coming through their hotel room door with an arm full of goods. It's his favorite way of gathering information. Traders hold no loyalty to any village. Their hearts belong to golden coins and any story that might keep them entertained over the long overland roads.

"I'm sorry, what?" Temari's head whips up from where she is inspecting her fan. "Sharingan Kakashi? As in, Son of the White Fang, Hatake Sakumo, the Scourge of Suna?"

"Yep," Kankuro answers, popping the 'p'. "And that is 'Momochi Zabuza, Demon of the Mist' to go along with him. Apparently, Oto and Kiri are not quite allies but definitely trade partners. In fact, The Lady of Oto directs most of the trade herself. Like, seven different traders said they owed their success to her investment advice."

" *What ?*" Temari cries shrilly.

"Oh, and get this, nobody is sure where she's been hanging out. Gaara, I'm not sure how you missed this, but the gossip ranges from 'She had urgent business out of country', to 'she got homesick', and my personal favorite: 'the Lady of Otogakure eloped with both of her guards'."

Temari gapes at this, but Gaara simply blinks, his lips turning downward into a frown. He knew he wasn't great at gathering

information, but he's not *that* bad. He just... doesn't really register what people say sometimes. They talk so much but say nothing. How is he supposed to catch all of this stuff?

"I... this sounds crazy," their sister murmurs, and Kankuro nods his head, coming to rest on one of the beds. It sinks under the weight of his body, and he scratches his cheek idly, sliding his eyes around to look out the window.

"It's a smokescreen if you ask me, but I couldn't tell you why. The only thing helpful I found is that the Otogakure delegation was staying at the noble's quarters in the north districts," he says.

"Then that's where we go," Gaara decides, and Temari sighs, folding her weapon shut with a resounding *snap* . She takes a deep breath in, trying to figure out the words she wants to say. It's not easy, but this is a lot of effort for just one woman, and she doesn't want to see her baby brother get hurt. Not when she can stop it.

"Gaara... have you considered not going?" she asks hesitantly.

He turns his unflinching gaze on her, and she meets it head-on. There's no turning away from this.

"I know she meant a lot to you, and we all liked her, but it's looking more and more like she's trouble. Are you sure you want to get involved when you aren't sure of her motivations for associating with us in the first place? She could be using you," Temari tries delicately.

Gaara doesn't answer. Not at first, because if he is honest, he still doesn't understand what Aneue is doing. He understands *why* she is doing it even less, and he thinks that sentiment might be something she shares.

Gaara knows there is a chance she could have been using him this entire time, getting close to him because he's the son of the Kazekage, or the jinchuuriki of the Ichibi, but he doesn't think so. It's not just the words that were exchanged that day, or the fondness he

feels for her on a personal level. He just doesn't think a professional saboteur would be as dedicated to him as she has been.

His hand comes up to finger his seaglass necklace, a habit he's grown into over the years.

If Aneue wanted just wanted his affection, or to use him, she could have gone about a better way. For one, she probably wouldn't have put up with as much pain as she did, because he was no good at controlling his sand when he was younger, and she bled a lot. For another thing, she could have simply only said nice things and given him treats, but she didn't. She taught him.

She made the world real, even when he didn't want her to. She didn't spoil him, and she didn't neglect him. She let him learn, showed him what compassion was, what pain felt like, and how at the end of the day, even though she might not be there, she supported him.

And when he lost everything, when his uncle betrayed him in the worst possible way, she was there. Ninja or not, it was dangerous, and she quite literally put her life in his hands.

He looks up, taking in the image of his older siblings. At one point they were scared of him, terrified to even be left alone in the same room with him, but now he can't imagine hiding anything from them.

"Love is giving someone a gift," he says slowly, remembering her words. "Through faith, trust, hope, or experience, it's praying they won't use it against you."

Temari sighs again, running a hand through her hair. It's shorter now, after her tournament fight, but it's still long enough to ruffle in exasperation. "I guess we can go check it out, as long you've thought about it," she relents. "But dad won't be happy."

Kankuro snorts, crossing his arms behind his head and falling back on the bed. He immediately regrets it once the puppet on his back jabs into his spine. He winces, rubbing the area.

"Fuck that guy. Not like he cares in the first place about us. I, personally, cannot wait to see how mad he gets when Baki-sensei informs him that the candy seller is actually a noble," he declares despite his discomfort, purposefully apathetic about his absentee father.

"Language," Gaara reprimands without heat, rolling his eyes.

"Yeah, Kankuro," Temari joins in, nudging him with her shin. "We're the children of the Kazekage in a foreign village. We have an image to protect. Watch your fucking language."

Gaara sighs.

AN: So, the late update? I fell asleep. Whoops. The good news is this is the beginning of the 'Together' arc, and also Gaara is in this chapter. Also, look, look with your silver eyes Kisame. See what ya'll fuckin missed out on. And Itachi... Row your dinghy. The Rower is the best. I hope he is in every chapter from now on. *Pointed glance*

Alright, seriously, if yu came for action, you may have to take a deep breath. The next thing arc is about *throws confetti* relationships and honesty. I mean, just look at the Sand sibs, because honestly? Pretty healthy familial relationship. The others? MMMm, need some work.

Thanks to my lurkers, favoriters, and followers. Thanks for your patience my reviewers, cause you guys have me going on creative sprees like woah.

Bless Enbi, who got this out even when I felt pooped out. :) sweet cinnamon roll, too good, too pure.

Question: Sand sibs and team seven (now new and improved with Haku) How does that go? OR Kisame and Itachi in the beach house with Ryuishi, what nonsense is waiting there?

In Which Separate Paths Begin to Merge

I do not own Naruto.

Reality is, logically speaking, what the most number of people agree upon being real at any moment in time.

Ryuishi lies in her bed, and the world hiccups, slides sideways, spins into a mad mixture of sensation and sound. She can hear whispering in the back of her head, all of the pieces of her mind working things out, rebooting from a hard crash. They gnaw on problems, little worries and anxieties, working through them, running scenarios and plans over and over again. They micromanage her thoughts, a low hum with no real order. Time slips away, and they race against it, wondering when she'll be lucid again.

She breathes in, and she wonders how everything is always viewed through a personal filter of perspective, regardless of choice. Though every language she knew of had a word for colors, how could she be sure that everyone saw colors the same, and hadn't assimilated the words to suit the colors based upon the lessons they were taught as children?

Also, things existed without needing people to agree upon them existing.

Regardless of opinion, things were made of atoms. Or at least, they were in her old world-she hoped it held true in this one. But how could she believe in an atom if she could never see it? Experience it secluded from other atoms, existing solely in its particular state. She could never be sure that atoms actually existed, or if it was something she was just taught and chose to believe in.

But also, atoms made up everything and thinking otherwise was fucking stupid.

Part of her recognizes that this is the reason she excels in genjutsu, because she can't really differentiate between reality even at the best of times, and therefore she experiences things very keenly. It makes it easy to invoke the sensations she needs, to recall what every one of her senses was experiencing at a single moment, and how her soul pulsed a certain way at times. It's like breathing to share these things, to tie herself and another person together, to make them one big loop of feedback and experience.

Genjutsu is like... it's like talking without words. There's no limitations to the language, no hindering of concepts because she uses the wrong adjective or cannot properly describe something. She takes an idea, a memory, and she gives it to another person, plain and simple.

The sheets slide up against her bare skin, freshly shaved and clean for the first time in ages. While her memories of the Akatsuki base aren't exactly clear, she does remember it, down to the nitty gritty details. Right now she's ignoring them, focusing in how nice it is to be in her bed, after having used her shower, wearing eyeliner for the first time in- *How long has it been? Oh Vishnu, oh god* -a while.

She sighs, closing her eyes, letting the warm sunlight filter through the window and rest on her. It feels amazing after the cold water and the numbness that crept along her fingers and toes. Idly, she sprawls in the empty space, and she feels a pang of loss when her limbs do not meet any others.

People are paradoxical, the pieces of her continue in the background, and because people are the only ones she knows that can discuss the definition of reality, reality reflects that. It's both real and not real, depending entirely upon the perspective. For instance, most people agree that trees exist, however, not so many people agree that ghosts exists. Therefore, trees are more real than ghosts.

The problem with that is it puts things on a scale, more real than less real. If something is less real, does it really exist, or does it only exist partially, like some sort of flux, real-then-not-real? If her flashbacks

only happen inside her head, and her hallucinations can only be seen by her, are they real, or are they not real?

Well, probably not real, but because she can only view reality through her own perspective, they are super real. So, a paradox, both real and not.

There is no squeak as her door opens, no tell other than the barest ghost of the air around her shifting, and she doesn't need to open her eyes to know who it is. A sudden wave of anger courses through her, and she feels her silent appreciation shift. The whisperings in the back of her head grow conflicted, some enraged beyond reason, others whispering comforts and idealizations.

She has every right to want to tear Kisame's face off, but she also knows that he was doing what he thought was best. She can honestly say that he has several, very valid points about her actions and choices. She can also empathize, because some of the worst things she has ever done have come about from her good intentions.

(betrayal, a city burning to ash, the cries of a stranger as she drags them to a snake, hundreds dead in grass, manipulations for the greater good, what is good, what is good-)

However, despite that, he also put her through one of her worst fears. She's still not alright, barely even approaching functional. He came in like he had a single goddamn clue about her and he sat by as she lost her fucking mind. Not only that, but indirectly, there are consequences beyond personal health as well. She still has no idea how much time has passed, and even if she wanted to fix things, she can hardly focus on one subject right now, let alone an entire scheme's worth of variables. She's being taken over by the hot curl of shame inside her gut that makes her want to hide, the lingering fear and paranoia that is her constant companion, and the cloying anger that clouds her senses.

Stuck inside her chaotic thoughts, she drifts, while Kisame pushes the door wider, peering inside. He doesn't know why he's drifted

upstairs, or what to think at all.

The house is... it's amazing, from the wood floors to the open, airy design. There is an entire hallway lined with rooms, and he still can't believe it all.

From the moment the wooden porch creaked under his feet, he had liked it. He liked stepping inside and having the smell of citronella and saltwater mingle in his nose, accented by something faint and floral. He liked the way the sunlight poured through the wide bay window, into the dining room, and how there were hooks to hang his cloak on, and a place to rest Samehada.

He was taken in by the bar between the kitchen and the dining room, the glossy countertops and gleaming appliances. The hallway leading down to the den was a display of wealth and comfort, the walls lined with doors to multiple rooms and a single bathroom.

The den was something else, and everything was finally the right size, large enough to fit his frame comfortably. He didn't bump his head on the ceiling, and the chairs weren't too low.

Amazingly enough, the bed in the upstairs room was bigger than his own, and the dresser and mirror made him want to simultaneously laugh and cry, because of *course* she would buy a big mirror and line it with beauty products. Of *course* she was still vain in her own ways after all these these years.

From the hardwood floors, to the fully stocked kitchen, he loves it, but there are aspects of the abode that stand out to him in particular.

The first is Zabuza's room, which is easy to tell apart due to the sheer mess inside of it. There are things hanging off his furniture, and kunai knives left half sharpened on the floor. An array of senbon has found itself embedded in the ceiling, and his gear is scattered across the entire space. The bed is curiously untouched, and it makes him think of a trio children and joined bedrolls.

It aches to look inside and see it, to know he could have been here, to see that he made a giant mistake. He misses his brother in arms, stoic and ignorant of social norms, and he doesn't even know how to go about fixing everything between them.

Then there is the other room, clearly lived in, containing a controlled spill inside. Opening the drawers reveals clothes for a slighter build and smaller stature than either of his teammates, and the medical herbs and texts are hilariously out of place. There's no way either of them suddenly found an interest in gastroenterology or poultices for sepsis infections.

There are other things, senbon and toys and trinkets. A stuffed rabbit with beady red eyes, and a flyer from a vacationing town. It's a teenager's room, and it makes his gut churn, because though neither of his teammates are old enough to have sired a teen, Itachi came to him as one and might as well be family at this point.

He broke apart a *family* .

The things that bother him most, though, are the pictures. There are familiar faces staring out at him through carefully penned sketches, with round features and almond eyes. A big man, a jolly woman, several boys, and a smiling girl with a freckled face. They have haunted him since her defection, the family she showed him before he was sent through the spiraling void. They sit like superfluous decorations in her home, hidden in plain sight.

The worst, or maybe the best, sit in the master bedroom, watching over the ridiculously large mattress. Old photographs faded by time and the light coming through the window, worn glossy in some places by wandering fingertips. It's the three of them, gathered together in some dirty backwater town, huddled close to fit in the frame. Her arms force them together, and though he and Zabuza look apathetic or distracted, she smiles brightly between them.

And then, two more, right next to the first. One of Zabuza, younger, still in his Kirigakure gear, and Kisame himself. Both taken years

after her defection, right before he went rogue.

When she told him she waited for them, he thought she had meant it in a passive manner. That perhaps she expected them to come back to her using the clues she gave them, following her trail like dogs. He didn't expect her to pine for them, to collect pictures he knows should be secure in the depths of Kirigakure's archives.

The first night, after checking the rooms and securing the perimeter, he sort of just... collapsed. He sat down in one of the big chairs in the den while Itachi took watch and Ryuishi slept in her bed, and he let it all wash over him. His mistakes, his regrets, his awe, his joy-he let himself process it all.

Now that morning has come and he's managed to warm up some of the frozen meals he found in the freezer, he's ready to keep going. To try and appreciate what is here, and mend what has been broken. She might not be herself now, but it will come in time.

"Ryuishi," he calls out, and the figure bathing in sunlight on the bed shifts. The bed sheets slide down a bare thigh, and he breathes out through his nose, praying that this goes well. "Ryuishi," he says again, stepping through the doorway, into the room. "I... there's breakfast downstairs, and the pills-"

She seems to spark into life at this, slowly pushing herself up from the blankets, her eyes on him. He notes that they look different than the past month-sharper, lined with black-and for the first time, she appears to be somewhat lucid around him. She not completely bare, thankfully, but her shirt has strings for arm straps, and her hair is loose and damp. But even in casual clothes, she looks menacing in her vexation.

"Oh?" she asks, but it is a mocking question. "The pills you *took* from me?"

Kisame sucks in a breath through his nose, because he didn't expect to be confronted with this so soon, but he does know that she has

slid in and out of clarity, so perhaps it's not that surprising. Previously, he assumed the all-consuming rage that took her over was her realizing what he had done. She hadn't tried to talk before now.

Technically, it's a good sign.

"Yes, those ones," he agrees carefully.

" *Do you even know-* " she starts angrily, but then her expression falters, and she looks to the side. For a moment he thinks he's lost her, but she seems to flutter, lost in indecision, unsure of which thought to follow.

He picks one for her. "I did something horrible," he says solemnly, and her eyes lock on to him. He steps closer, approaching her with an open, unfaltering gait. "I thought something was right when it wasn't, and I put you through torture. It's unforgivable, and the moment I'm sure you're stable again, if you want me gone, I will go."

She seems to be struck speechless at this, and he doesn't comment on the befuddled expression her face takes on, or the way her mouth opens up ever so slightly. He merely nods, mostly to himself, and he sits himself on the edge of the mattress, leaving space between them. He understands what he has done, and he would understand if she decided that it was beyond anything she could forgive. Yes, there are scars between them, things he wants closure with, old wounds and older questions he wants to discuss, but he won't stay if it does more damage than good.

"Kisame," she breathes, and he grits his jaw, staring at the ground in front of him. He can't quite look at her, with uncombed wet hair and still too wild eyes. It's a cowardly thing to do, but if he looks at her, he won't say what needs to be said.

"I'll repeat it as many times as I need to, because I know you aren't... well yet, and you might forget. I stand by what I said about you having no direction and several other issues, and I think Orochimaru

is as vile as they come, but that's for you to work out. Obviously, I'm not going to be able to show you another way," he admits. How could he show her another way when he couldn't even tell when someone was lying about who they were to his face for years? Of course Madara would be dead by now, shinobi legend or not. What was he thinking? Hell, how could he do it when he couldn't even tell that Zetsu was....whatever Zetsu was?

He scowls at the ground, suddenly angry at himself, but it falters when he feels the mattress move beneath him, and ice cold fingertips grip his chin, turning his face away from the floor. Her face fills his view, shaded by the light of the morning sun streaming through the window behind her.

"I'm feeling too much and there are too many choices," she tells him honestly. "When I can focus again, and I'm not... all over the place, I'll make up my mind. For now, this will tide me over."

He furrows his brows, confused, until she lashes out, as quick as a striking snake. She's too close to stop, and he should have suspected it, but he let his guard down. He pays for it dearly, when her fist smashes into his groin, and he doubles over as agony consumes him. The air in his body leaves in one great whoosh, and he heaves loudly, his whole body curling in on itself instinctively.

"That is for *kidnapping* me, treating me like a *fucking* child, leaving Zabuza behind, and taking my medicine after I *specifically* asked you not to. It's not going to be the last time, either," she snaps angrily, and Kisame is sure he can taste how much he hurts.

Then he feels cool arms snake around him, and then there is a body pressed against his. It's lean muscle and sloping curves melding against him until she wraps around him as best she can. His head rest on her chest, her hands on his shoulders, and even though he feels like he's about to puke, it's kind of comforting.

"This is because you're here, because you survived," she continues, embracing him.

Her head feels foggy, and he's not as warm as Zabuzza, but he is a piece she has been missing, one that feels right in her arms. She hates him, wants to destroy him and cry a million tears, but also... He's her commander, and she said once she would follow him into hell. He was also able to do the one thing she could never do. He saw something was wrong, admitted it, and immediately rectified it. He approached things like an adult, in ways she never could. There is a disgusting amount of problems between them all, and the whispering is picking up the more she thinks about it, but she has a hole in her heart filled, and she's so close to feeling whole again. She's survived, even though surviving means more battles to fight in the future.

From the doorway, Itachi watches them both with distaste and exasperation. He came as soon as he heard Kisame talking, and he watched the whole thing. As always, they manage to be sickeningly endearing, even as malfunctioning and strange as they are.

Maybe that's the charm of a Kiri ninja. Not a single one of them adheres to conventional logic, and they are as obscure as the fog they come from, but there is something to be said about the way they envelop you whole.

Quietly, he turns away, intent on grabbing some of the reheated meal below. It's been awhile since he has had the pleasure of indulging in a home-cooked meal, and after he sends his summons out, he has nothing else to do for the entire day.

He can't remember the last time he hasn't had anything to do. It's been pressure and subterfuge and missions as long as he has existed.

As he thinks about the sweet spread for the bread on the table, and the wide, sunny beach outside, he makes up his mind. He's going to enjoy this vacation as long as it lasts, and the Kiri ninja can sort themselves out.

The residence for visiting foreign dignitaries in Konoha that Aneue is rumored to have resided in is what Gaara would deem 'extravagant'. Its exterior is walled off from the main districts with soft white stones, and the buildings themselves are crafted from sort of sleek wood, stained the color of rich, wet earth. Even the walkway up to the entrance is lined with verdant greenery; soft young grasses, and a sapling with ashy bark and pale, soft green leaves. The smell of the gardens drifts gently by on the breeze, and it is ripe with a fruity, floral note.

It's a long, long way from the hotel rooms Aneue chose to stay at in Sunagakure, with rumpled, well-worn sheets and sparse furnishings. His home is not like this place, with its abundant life and temperate climate. Trees do not grow straight and wide, untwisted by the howling winds, and there are no carpets of spring grass to bed down on. The only flowers that grow are small and ephemeral, bright dashes of color against the beige that crop up after the sparse rains and wilt within a few short days.

"Damn," Kankuro mutters under his breath. "If this is what she was used to, what did she think of Suna?"

Temari slaps the back of his head for that comment, but Gaara is unperturbed by it. He remembers the way she spent her time when he was younger, dragging him along to revel in the sunshine and bask in the heat of the desert. She napped in the shade of the sandstone domes, and sang to him under the light of a thousand stars, the view of the heavens unimpeded by a canopy. This may be more suited to conventional nobility, all luxury and wealth, but the woman he knows was just as comfortable walking in the market as she was sleeping on the rooftops with him.

The siblings walk up to the sliding door with every ounce of grace and dignity that has been instilled in them by years and years of tutors. They are the children of the Kazekage, and though they are ninja, they are no strangers to ostentatious displays of wealth and trite political arenas. They are clean and in their best dress, their weapons on display and their tongues guarded.

The noise of the village seems muffled as they approach the front door, blocked out by those stone walls and, if Gaara suspects correctly, a few well placed seals. It's a relief to him, because the Leaf Village seems to be not only reveling in the end of the Chuunin Exams, but gearing up for a celebration of a different sort tonight. If the rumors are to be believed, then the Hokage is announcing his successor soon. Temari's bet is on the blonde woman who has been seen around town, with amber eyes that belay inner steel and a will of fire.

Whatever that means, scoffs the monster inside of him. Gaara is equally unsure of the definition, but he elects to ignore the quiet whispering inside of his head the same way that he always does.

The trio makes it to the front entrance, but before they can even announce their presence, the sliding door is flung open by a disgruntled-looking boy. Gaara recognizes him as the same one who interrupted his meeting with Aneue in the marketplace, and his curiosity grows. Who is he, and why is he here now?

"What?" he says sharply.

Gaara is momentarily taken aback by the vehemence in the statement. He doesn't even know this boy.

"Naruto," another voice chastises, smoother and more lyrical. "Don't be rude."

This time, someone unknown steps into view, their features soft and androgynous. With shining hair, a slender nose, and pouty lips, Gaara hesitates to give them a set biological sex.

"Welcome, how may I-" they begin to say, and then they stop short, their eyes growing focused and their placid expression slipping away at the sight of the trio at the door. For a moment, recognition slips over their features, there but gone in a flash.

"Sunagakure has caught word that the most honored and successful country of Rice has elected official ambassadors. In interest of maintaining beneficial relationships, we elected to meet them," Temari lies smoothly. For a second, Gaara is surprised, but then he remembers his sister is the one who files their reports to their father, and that for some time she studied diplomacy under Honored Elder Councilman Ebizō.

"Ah," they say in understanding. If he focuses on the person's face, and not the way they are shoving the protesting Naruto out of view, he would be tempted to say they present themselves as a perfectly understanding, if surprised, host. "Apologies, but the representatives of Otogakure are busy at the moment."

"Busy, or not in the village?" Kankuro gives them a pointed look, and Gaara winces as the greeter's face slides into something blank and cold.

"Who the *fuck* do you think you are-" Naruto begins, only for a set of arms wrap around his mouth from behind the door and pull his struggling body away. Gaara catches sight of black hair and livid eyes. Another one from the marketplace. The whole team must be here.

"I apologize for Naruto. He can be rather excitable," the remaining figure says tonelessly, their eyes like hard chips of glass. "Who did you say sent you again?"

Gaara shuffles as he feels irritation rise off his sister, and he can almost hear the way she clicks her nails against her thigh. A bad habit, and a worse tell.

"I'm sorry," Temari states in her most prim 'I am the Kazekage's first born' voice. "But do those happen to be Water Country robes you are wearing?"

The other does not miss the pointed, subtle question. If anything, they stand straighter, using their height to their advantage, and they

look down their nose at the group in a way that most daimyo would be jealous of. It's composed and condescending all at once.

"As the ward of the Kirigakure delegate and the Lady of Otogakure, I am free to represent each of their proud nations as I please," they say haughtily.

Nobody misses the implications of that statement, and Gaara cannot help but widening his eyes. Behind him, Temari inhales in surprise, and Kankuro chokes.

"She has a kid?!" his brother sputters, and the pretense of nobility is lost at that declaration. Damn Kankuro and his inability to mask his shock better.

"Does this mean that Kiri has allied with Otogakure through marriage?" Temari demands, scrambling desperately for intel.

"Absolutely-" the greeter starts to say, but they are cut off by a flash of pink, and a determined, irritated genin with the most appalling bubblegum-colored hair.

"-not," she finishes, interrupting him. "Though there *is* a match between Konohagakure and Otogakure through a prominent clan-"

She is elbowed viciously by the greeter, who looks down at her with an dispassionate expression, their jaw clenched.

"Sakura, stop telling these nice ninja lies," they snap.

" *You* stop telling lies, Haku. 'Son of the delegates' my ass," she hisses back, stomping on their foot.

Ah, well, at least they have a name and a gender now, the voice in Gaara's head grumbles. **Not that the latter really matters.**

The two in front of them continue their thinly veiled argument, and Temari seems at a loss. Kankuro, if anything, seems even more bewildered, and it's up to Gaara to salvage the situation.

He clears his throat, and all eyes turn to him. He lets a moment of silence pass so they can gather themselves, and then he asks the question that has been on his mind for a while now.

"Where is Aneue?"

The two at the doorway seem to visibly distance themselves. Not physically, but their expressions close off, and they stand straighter. He can almost see the way they check their surroundings, building a wall between the outside world and themselves.

Behind them comes a groan, and an unfamiliar voice joins the conversation, which must be the black-haired boy's.

" *Really?* " he says.

Haku, their greeter, sighs, and he steps out of the way, waving them inside. For a moment, Gaara is confused, but Temari nudges him from behind, and they enter the premises, taking their shoes off and closing the door behind them. Gaara feels a snap of chakra, and his suspicion of seals is proven correct as the noise from outside cuts off completely.

"What...?" Temari starts, staring at the black haired boy, who is seated atop Naruto, subduing him. A slicing hand gesture silences her, and they face Haku, who smiles pleasantly, his mouth saying one thing while his fingers sign another.

"A-ha-ha... I apologize for the misunderstanding. She really isn't here, but you all are welcome to tea in my quarters. I'll go prepare a pot of it while Sakura shows you the way," his voice says, his hand coming up to his face as if embarrassed.

His other hand, however, hides beneath his elbow, flexing through signs at a rapid pace. From above, it would appear to the world that he was simply flustered by his mistake.

Sentries above. Follow informant to secure location. Cover speak, his fingers explain. Curiously enough, it is in Suna sign, and Gaara rapidly reevaluates the boy in front of him as he sweeps down a hall. Not a harmless greeter of spoiled noble. A ninja. A good one.

Sakura, the girl, smiles innocently, and Gaara cannot tell if it is a guise or real. "You guys must be from the Chuunin Exams. You should tell us all about it, because we're hoping to enter them next time," she says pleasantly, walking backwards towards the two boys. She nudges them with her foot, facing the siblings, and Gaara doesn't miss the way her hands are hidden behind her back, as if to inform them of the situation.

"Well," Kankuro drawls, picking up on the undertones and presenting an uninterested facade. "Can't really do that. Secrecy wavers and all that."

"Yep," agrees Temari, a little too quickly. "Right of passage and promotion. You know how it is."

The boys stand on either side of Sakura, and they seem genuinely put out. Naruto appears to examine Gaara harshly, looking him over as if he's making some sort of checklist.

"Well, that stinks." The girl pouts cutely, and she waves them onward, down a corridor, chattering all the while. Gaara lets the sound wash over him, his nerves suddenly singing to life under his skin. He came here for answers, and he's getting the feeling that he isn't going to like them at all.

They are led through a maze of corridors hung with tapestries and gaudy displays of wealth, down through the truly breathtaking gardens, and into the adjoining building. They pass several quarters, and eventually, the girl opens up the door to a room that is bare, save for a pile of clothes and a few bags.

The Suna trio enter, alert and on guard, and the genin close the door behind them. Once more, Gaara feels the telltale crawling sensation

of seal work being activated, but this time it is more subtle. Instead of a low buzz, it is a soft whisper.

As suddenly as she picked it up, Sakura lets her facade drop. Her face is grave, and she examines the squad before her with keen eyes.

Agitated, Temari lashes out, her anger coming to a head with all the covert acts. "What the hell is this? Who are you brats, and-"

"Wait," Naruto interrupts, as impassive and unmoved by her anger as stone.

Temari sucks in a breath, and Kankuro starts to pull himself to his full height, readying for a confrontation. Gaara catches his eyes, and seafoam green meets sky blue. There is a moment where the world seems to pause, and Gaara holds up his hand.

His siblings quiet, and he crosses his arms, going to the table in the center of the room. He doesn't sit, and therefore nobody else does.

Haku comes in not long after, carrying a plate full of snacks and a steaming pot of tea. The smile on his face is serene, and he looks like he is honestly going to entertain guests. Gaara would have never guessed he was acting just from looking at him.

The door closes, and the tingle crawls over his skin again. Their host sets the teapot down on the wooden surface of the table, alongside the snacks, but unlike everybody else, he drops into his seiza without regard for the ongoing tension.

Carefully, Gaara follows suit, and then so do the others.

"Why are there seals?" Temari blurts out, her nervous tension leaking out once more.

"Because Hatake-san does not trust the Otokage with his team, and rightly so," Haku says, pouring himself a cup from the pot. He combs

his hair behind his ear, and faces them all, a blank slate. "However, that is not why you came."

Gaara nods slowly, shuffling that data around to the back of his head, where he can examine it later. The Otokage doesn't bother him now, but that doesn't mean he won't later.

"Where is Aneue?" he repeats solemnly, and Sakura flinches this time, her hands clenching into fists.

"Why do you need to know where nee-san is?" Naruto says, eyeing him suspiciously. "You left her in the market place."

"Naruto," Sakura chides softly, but the black haired boy beside him lays a comforting hand on his shoulder.

"I needed time to think. She accepted that," Gaara says calmly, his eyes never straying from Haku's face. He seems to be the one in the lead here, not the genin team.

"Well now you're too late. You messed up, so you can leave," Naruto bites out, visibly seething, and his words make the voice inside cackle madly. Gaara feels something like nausea rise inside him, and it is as unfamiliar as it is unwelcome.

"What does he mean, too late?" Kankuro demands, and Haku doesn't flinch. He remains cold and unmoving, carved from ice. His eyes bore holes into Gaara's, weighing him, measuring him.

"And who is she, anyway? Because Sunagakure knows her as a merchant, but no merchant walks beside a Kage dressed as fine as she was. She was guarded by the Copycat and the Demon of the Mist, and now nobody can find them either. *What is going on?*" Temari adds on to the growing list of questions, her voice rising higher and higher with each query.

There is silence for a moment, and Gaara's stomach does a weird sort of flip and turn. He's not sure what to call it. Is it... Is it

nervousness? Is he anxious right now?

"The only reason I tell you this, is because she trusted you," Haku says tiredly, his voice like a sigh on the wind. "In a better life, she said that you and Naruto would have been raised as my brothers."

Naruto makes a strangled noise in his throat, as if he cannot believe that the redhead in the room qualifies for such a statement. Curiously enough, the sound is mirrored by Gaara's actual blood siblings.

"Your Aneue, as you call her, is very important. Her actions and policies have changed many lives. Unfortunately, they also drew the worst sort of attention. She has been taken, and both Hatake-san and Zabuza-sama are looking for her," Haku tells him sorrowfully, and Gaara hears a strange ringing in his ears. It's hollow and overwhelming.

Taken, it echoes, and this time it is not the monster inside speaking, but his own voice bouncing back at him in the emptiness. *Too late*.

His sand roils on his skin, and he feels like he's about to heave. Yes, he wasn't sure what Aneue meant to him, or what was between them, but that doesn't mean he didn't care about her. That doesn't mean other people were just allowed to storm right in and take her.

His breath comes in ragged, short bursts, and no matter how hard he tries, he can't breathe. There isn't enough air, and he's suffocating.

Good job, brat, the monster hisses. **You really did it now.**

He clenches his hands into fists, feels the sand on his fingers vibrate and slither about under his touch. For the first time in years, it moves without his allowance, motivated by his sudden shock.

"Gaara!" he distantly hears Temari call out. His heart is beating like a drum in his ears, and the petulant, violent whispers of the monster drips poison into his brain.

"I'm trying," he gasps, clawing at the shell around his face. It sheds sand, grains continuously slipping off onto the ground, and he feels his blood dry up, evaporate underneath his skin. Fear runs through his veins, because she was important, she was big and he was small and he thought she might not care. He didn't even think that she would be drawing jealous eyes. That people would want to hurt her.

Fear courses through him, like it always does, and he desperately tries to latch on to a song. She always sang to him, and it lulled the monster back to quietness. But she isn't here, and she can't hum, because **she's been taken.**

"One, two, three, four-" Kankuro starts counting in his ear, and he times his breathing as his brother speaks. He breathes in seven second, lulled by his voice, holds it four seconds, and breathes it out seven more. He feels the hands of his sister on his, even though the sand leaves scrapes on her skin. Even though she used to be so afraid of him.

"You got it, it's alright," Temari soothes. "We'll find her, don't worry. Kankuro and I will go with you even, It's going to be okay."

"There are jounin looking," somebody comments, and Temari's eyes narrow at them her hand never leaving her brothers.

"It hurts nothing if we look as well," she bites out. "Gaara has unfinished business with her, so we'll look."

"Your village-"

"Shut up! You aren't helping!"

"-six, seven. Hold. One, two, three, four. Out. One-" Kankuro continues steadily, and slowly, Gaara controls it instead of it controlling him. The sand shivers and shakes, and the terror is still there, but his siblings are more real. He trusts in them, trusts that they will go onward and find her.

"Then let us help," that lyrical voice interrupts, and Gaara looks at the boy across from him, who seems to be carved from ice, immovable as a mountain and unfathomable as the endless desert sky. (Of course, he never sees the panic leeching into Haku's eyes, or the way his mind scrambles to come up with a way to salvage the situation.)

Temari bristles. "How? By sending him into another attack?" she sneers.

"By looking with him. The more eyes, the better, right? And I can gather clues where you cannot," he states quickly. "You are the Kazekage's children. I have no doubt you are exceptional ninja, but I am her ward. If you want to move with stealth, than I can show you how to cross the country unnoticed, and even leave this village undetected."

"Haku, we can't just run out and look for her," Sakura tries to reason, but he desperately tries to repair the damage he's done and stares at Naruto. The blond looks conflicted, torn between oaths and promises.

"And what, let somebody else go and look for her alone?" Haku counters, trying to get him to understand. He can't just let a piece of her heart go wandering the continent, storming around the place, being a blatant target. Zabuza trusted him to keep them all safe. And he made mistakes, he thought the redhead would be more reasonable, would understand.

The boy hesitates. "I..."

" *Naruto*," Haku grinds out. " *Sakura* . *Sasuke* . Listen to me. I can't let them go off alone when I can go with them."

Sakura seems to get the point first, that Haku literally cannot let anyone run off alone right now, and that he misjudged the situation. She withholds a groan, but covers her face with her hands. Technically, defection is only cemented when the Daimyo says so,

which is why the Sannin could do whatever they pleased, and then come back. Or, rather, why two could do whatever they pleased and one could pay reparations. If they leave some sort of notice, and Haku leads them to a safe enough place, they might even make it back before their sensei returns from wherever he is.

"You're right. We aren't babies, we're ninja," Naruto says resolutely, reaching the wrong conclusion entirely. He says it with all the conviction he has, truly believing in his words. "We should all be looking for her, not sitting around doing nothing. She *needs* us."

This time Sakura actually lets out a groan, unable to hold it in, and Sasuke seems to reach the same conclusion she has. His stoic mask never moves, but if she listens closely, she can hear the strangled, frustrated noise he makes in his chest.

"Yes," he forces out darkly.

Temari watches them all as her baby brother climbs his way back out of his panic attack, and her hard eyes leave no room for argument. They know more about this woman, and possibly the people who took her. She's not going to let her brother wallow in misery, not when there is a chance that he could revert to the way he was before Risa-or rather, the Lady of Otogakure-came.

"Then it's agreed. We can leave tonight, while the village celebrates. You said you could sneak us out, and from there, we get clues-"

"I know just the place," Haku interrupts, thinking of the only place he knows is safe in the entire world. No one would ever look there, no one has ever looked there. He can hide all the pieces of her heart in her home, and he'll make sure to leave clues for Zabuza so he knows where they are.

"Aneue," Gaara says quietly.

"Nee-san," Naruto agrees.

Haku just hums, and he clenches his fist inside his robe. He laments his mouth, because he knows by now he can't keep secrets, he should just be quiet. But no, that isn't right. He's doing his best. and Ryuishi would pat him on the head and embrace him warmly for trying so hard. She would agree that Konoha is no longer safe with Zabuza gone, and that Orochimaru will take advantage of the situation if given enough time. She is the one who knows that the only safe place in the world is their home, she built it that way.

He'll just convince them that there are clues-and there might be, because she kept tabs on everything. If there is information to be found about the men in black cloaks with red clouds, he'll find it there, but he can't help wondering if this is how it starts. With good intentions, muddling the truth just a little bit so he can keep everyone safe.

He looks around at the siblings he has chosen and the team he has collected. He's determined to keep them safe, to do the best he can for them, like she does for everyone else.

Just one lie, he thinks, and he feels his gut clench. *Just one lie is how it starts.*

AN: Hey! Early update because I will be gone for a while. Just some things to note; Ryuishi hasn't forgiven Kisame. That's not over. Itachi is done with thier shit though, he's so fucking done. Gaara... bleh. Ma. Well, he's dedicated. His sibling? Not really liking where this is going.

I need to sleep. Here, have this.

Shout out to my lurkers, fav'ers and followers. Many blessings to my reviewers, who keep me strong.

To my beta enbi; Thank you. You didn't have to do this when I know you are busy. (Ya'll go thank them. They are the one that pushed this update.)

In Which We Discover Sects

I do not own Naruto.

The Land of Lightning is not a place Kakashi has ever felt is welcoming in any sense of the term. Perhaps it is because of Fire and Lightning's long standing rivalry, or their even longer history of aggression, or his own, much more personal history with it. Whatever it is, the mountainous landscape has never evoked anything but wariness and caution on his part.

Water Country natives lead them onward, Misaki hoisted high on Tenzō's back, her face hidden against his shoulder to avoid the biting winds of Lightning Country's high peaks. It's nothing compared to their brief sojourn through frost country, but the air is thinner here, less moist, and it cuts like knives through the thick fabric of their cloaks. He can feel the skin of his fingers chap and begin to peel after such a long time spent traveling at high speeds against the headwind.

How Zabuza can stand going shirtless, he doesn't know. He just knows that the craggy stone and sparse, twisted forests of this country are enough to put him on high alert, even if the info provided hadn't made him wary to begin with.

A brothel, Misaki informed them, hidden in the mountains of Kumo, near a trade village. It was something of a rest point for the bloodline gangs under Ryuishi's sway, but more than that, it was the center of a vast web of brothels, bars, host clubs, and gambling dens that spanned the continent. Effectively, it was the nerve center of her information network, and as such, it was protected.

A fortress, Zabuza said. Fortified to the back and sides by a mountain, built into the stone itself. It holds the high ground, and approaching from the front means walking through a clearing where

the trees have been cut away. Entrances are bottlenecked, opening up once inside, but from the outside, there is only hard wood, most likely fortified with seals.

A varying amount of traffic runs through it, but most notably, large numbers of Hōzuki, Kaguya, and Yuki clan members. It was mothers, mostly, but time passed and children grew into adults, and civilian students became fighters in their own rights. Patrol pattern unknown. Combat-ready fighters unknown. Supplies unknown.

It becomes obvious that for all they know, they aren't completely sure of anything. So much has been hidden or obscured, and even more is constantly in flux. Misaki looks a little put out by the thought, but Zabuza is steely in his regard. He keeps moving onward and upward, making his way to the unknown town without pause.

Kakashi and Tenzō follow on, feeling a little bit out of their depth. It's not an ANBU mission, or technically any sort of sanctioned mission at all, and Misaki heavily advised against any village insignia on approach. To Zabuza, it may have been nothing to stuff his hitai-ite in his pocket, but to Kakashi it was like leaving an article of clothing off. He feels... bare. The scrap of cloth he uses in its place doesn't have the same weight or density, and it's all wrong, but he continues on anyway.

The village itself is not what Kakashi would consider little, but nor would he consider it a town. Years ago it might have been that way, but now it is a small city, and even from a distance he can see that most of the construction in it is new, within the last decade. It makes sense, that if this is a focal point for her network, then the traffic through the area would bring increased trade and prosperity to a once-small lumber village.

The group elects to go around it, over a high ridge with gnarled, twisted pines that hide them from view. It's not so much to be secretive, but to avoid distractions and keep a low profile. Word can't get out about this, and a city like this one is bound to have eyes and ears for several different factions.

"A shame," Misaki whispers, casting her eyes down to the city below them. Puffs of smoke drift up from chimneys, and he can see the telltale signs of urbanization even from this height. There is electrical wiring running across the town, and billboards advertising the newest goods. "It would be a good place to introduce you to those who have settled. Older ninja and new families. There are many children."

He doesn't respond, but his gaze does sweep over the valley in which the city lies. He supposes that with all the effort she put into increasing crop production and agricultural revolution, it's unsurprising that there are many new lives. Coupled with the notes he has skimmed for wider spread medical care, and selectively increased trade, the population boom that didn't make sense before now has an explanation.

How many? he wonders as they move. How many children were born because their parents gained access to better nutrition? How many people are alive because there was a doctor to cure their illness or treat their wounds? How many impoverished areas became flush with business because she directed the goods where they would be needed the most?

He wonders about it for a little while, right until they make it to the edge of the treeline, and Zabuza motions for them to stop. Carefully, Misaki drops down from Tenzō's back, her legs weak and wobbly after being held for so long. She casually rubs life back into them while Kakashi scopes out the scene in front of him.

At first glance it looks clean and tired, like any nightclub during mid-morning. However, he feels a prickling sensation along his neck, and there is a distinct sense that everything is not what it seems. He feels watched, and he tenses under the weight of it. He can't sense anybody, cannot smell or see them, but there is something out there.

(The Yuki use mirrors, and the forest is alive with them, each puddle and reflection a window to remotely observe passerby through.)

As if summoned by some unseen signal, or alerted by scouts, a woman steps out of the balcony, guarded on each side by robed clan members.

The first thing he notices is the steely look in eyes and her proud, haughty bearing. Her hair is done in the elaborate style favored by courtesans of twenty years ago, streaked with silver and white, and her cheeks sag in a manner that bespeaks of a lifetime of tight-lipped frowns and dour expressions. Her clothes are fine, but not elaborate, and there is a certain way she stands, guarded and defensive, that makes him think of smoky taverns and intelligence gathered through illicit means.

He sends Zabuza's broad back an irritated stare, because this happens to be another one of those things he conveniently forgot to mention. Nobody breathed a word about her being a kunoichi herself.

As if sensing his disapproval, the swordsman glances back at him, noticing where his gaze has strayed. He grunts unapologetically, and bites out the words, "Seduction Corps."

Kakashi frowns with distaste beneath his mask. Mostly because the Seduction Corps was abolished a long time ago in Konoha, due to the high fatality rate and the declining health of many of the agents. People were not kind to saboteurs, and Konoha put the health of its people over the few missions of that nature that came their way. Kiri, however, had a history of taking on missions no other country would. Historically, they didn't have many resources, so they used what they had, and took what they could. Their cutthroat tactics and acceptance of frankly appalling missions was a longstanding tradition.

He looks over to the woman again as she waves them inside, wordlessly inviting them into what could be a trap, and he notes her age. Not many seduction agents made it past their first few missions, yet she seems to be in good health. It makes him wary.

He brings up the rear of the group, Misaki leading them single file through the clearing. Zabuza's bulk blocks out most of his view of her, but as they pass through the glade and enter the building, he loses sight almost completely. The change in lighting is drastic, and the wave of scent that washes over him gives him a headache as he enters the door that leads directly to a steep set of stairs.

They move forward slowly, and there is a golden glow at the end of the short bottleneck that he has to crane his neck to see. The wooden steps creak ever so slightly, and there is a soft murmuring that reaches his ears as he climbs, accented by the clinking of ceramics and steel and the soft flutter of fabric.

The top of the stairway is something of an entry room, and if his eyes are to be believed, then the building goes far further back than what he originally perceived. It must actually be carved into the mountain itself, allowing for the full extent to remain unknown. He would bet good money that there are tunnels and halls that wind within the stony earth, leading to back exits and secret entrances known only to the ninja who use the area.

And there certainly are *many* ninja.

He can tell them apart from the workers by the weapons they hold and the scrolls that adorn their bodies. Many are young adults, late teens and early twenties, but there seems to be more than a fair share of matriarchs, who the others glance at to see how they should react to the strange newcomers. They congregate in small groups, and they watch the group proceed upwards with narrowed eyes and heavy amounts of suspicion. A few seem to glance at Misaki, and find their relief from her coy smile and tiny waves of acknowledgement, but more look at the swordsman among them. They linger on his blade, and the medallion dangling from the tip of it, and it seems to give them comfort-or at least, assurance that they are not here to cause trouble.

Eventually, the group makes their way to an open room with windows that face the glade they came from, showcasing a view of

the entire valley below. It's quite the sight, especially considering that Kakashi was unaware that the front had windows. The angle was all wrong to see them from below, and he thinks that is entirely on purpose. He's not even sure they're made of glass, considering the fortifications this place has.

In front of them, the older woman ignores the hurried, hushed whispers of the two guards that have accompanied her onto the balcony, and she waves them away as if battling flies out of her face. In her hands, a long, ebony pipe smolders lazily, and smoke curls up from the tip, spiralling up into the ceiling.

"Leave," she says finally, in a stern, annoyed voice, and her guards hesitate, but follow the command, sending wary glances at the group and the Okiya mother. It is only after they have left and the door has shut behind them does she deign to even glance at those assembled in the open, airy space.

She weighs them all, her painted lips pulled downward into a frown as she lifts the mouthpiece of her pipe to them, taking a drag of whatever lies within. He hears the faint crackle of the ember on the tip, the quick rush of air, and then she breathes it out in a cloud around her.

"Why have you come?" the matron asks sharply, her voice worn by time and, apparently, smoke.

"Kagami-san, always so quick to rush things," Misaki chides, and the old woman's eyes snap over to her, her fingers tightening on her pipe. "Nobody has been introduced yet. What will the others say of our manners?"

Kagami sneers at the implications of the statement, and Kakashi can see the lines in her skin deepen with the gesture. *It's an expression that suits her*, he thinks unkindly. *Sour and stern.*

"They will say that you bring two unknown shinobi with you into this place, Misaki, and that only the Odayaka Oni accompanying you

stops us from dealing justice for such treachery," she snaps. "They will say that it has been months since anyone has seen the Rakki Ryuu here, and though Mama Kagami assures us it is well, there is unease. They will say that her last official letter came some time ago, and that the tribe is preparing for something big."

Misaki goes to open her mouth, looking more riled than Kakashi has seen her before, but she's cut short by the deep rumbling voice of Zabuza, who interrupts without regret.

"Fuguki's student came back," he informs her tonelessly.

The room goes quiet, and Kakashi idly tries to figure out who Fuguki is while the old woman leans back again, a sort of weariness settling in her limbs. She inhales from her pipe once more, and she sighs as if the weight of the world rests on her shoulders, watching them all through veiled eyes.

Kakashi feels his gut churn, because this is not the reaction of somebody who has been surprised or shocked. This is the response of somebody who put forth a test, hoping the recipient would fail, and is disappointed they succeeded.

"You know," he accuses her, and she turns to him slowly, her gaze indolent.

"I know," she agrees. "It is my job to know, Hatake Kakashi."

The words make him grit his teeth, because if she already knows then it's likely she has already come to a conclusion on her own. There is no case to be made here, and it appears that for all he has discovered, the trip has been wasted.

Idly, he wonders what growing with this woman must have been like, because she is manipulative and predatory, and he finds her distasteful in every sense of the word. At one point, Ryuishi was owned by her, little more than an animal in a stable waiting to reach maturity. He finds he doesn't like the conclusion he has reached: that

maybe Orochimaru is not where Ryuishi obtained her callousness from, but a role model that came even earlier than that.

"You said official letter," Tenzō says, his voice void of any gives or tells, and Kakashi mentally applauds the skill, even though he regrets what his kōhai had to go through to obtain it.

Kagami focuses on him, and she drums her fingers on the table in front of her, a wry grin creeping up on her features. "Good catch, young man. Yes, officially she has sent me no more messages since she was in Konoha. However, a few days ago a crow managed to drop off a gift. A package of sand and a branch of mangrove," she says, her grin fading. "No letters, no words, only dirt and a plant, alongside a brand of candy I know she favors."

Zabuza stiffens, standing straighter, and Kakashi can almost see the anxious energy run through him, pushing him to move. The obscure clue is not missed by the swordsman then, which bodes well for the group.

Misaki, however, seems concerned about other things.

"The tribe," she says coldly to the older woman in a reminder.

Kagami waves a weathered palm, the blue of her veins standing out in her ring-laden hands. He notes a long, thin scar that runs down her thumb, almost invisible to the naked eye. "You know as well as I do that this has been coming for some time. She gave them autonomy, and they wish to test themselves without her lead. I will remain loyal because it makes no sense to abandon a cow that still produces so much milk."

Kakashi is repulsed by the analogy. Still, she thinks of Ryuishi in such a way, as little more than a prized animal.

"That is unacceptable. Have you even tried to contact them and explain what is happening?" Misaki bites out, and for the first time he realizes that all is not well within Ryuishi's kingdom. Like many

others, there is infighting and strife between sects. Her presence must have alleviated some of it, simply by being an impartial third party who could dole reason among those attempting to hoard more power to themselves.

Kagami scowls at the younger woman, defensive at the jibe. She raises her finger to point rudely, condescending and cold. "Don't patronize me, *girl* . Of course I have. Whether or not that idealistic brat responds is another matter entirely. I warned her time and time again that the tribe was given too much freedom, and this is the cost of it. She loses control of them."

"Freedom is the entire point, Kagami-san," Misaki spits. "You aren't in Kirigakure anymore."

Kagami scoffs. "Tch, freedom is some pipe dream-"

The two bicker on, and he listens with interest until Zabuza begins to move. The man turns his back on the group without saying a word, and Kakashi hesitates only for a moment before joining him, snatching Tenzō's arm while the two women go on. He is a goal-oriented person, and the goal right now is Ryuishi. If he's leaving, there is good reason for it.

"What now?" Kakashi asks quietly as they exit the room.

"Now we go where she is," Zabuza says. "We go home."

Spending time inside the hidden house on the beach after spending so long with only Akatsuki bases as anything near a home is... strange, to say the least.

For one thing, Kisame can't get used to how bright it is outside of Rain. There are no storm clouds hovering overhead, and there is no endless rain and ambient chill lingering in the air. There are windows here, unlike the blank walls of some of the underground hideouts, and the scenery outside isn't bleak cement and steel buildings, but a

wash of vibrant colors. There is a certain uncertainty that comes with squatting in one place longer than a week, not waiting for missions to come or orders to fulfill, and it settles in his bones.

This place is so warm, so cheerful and domestic, it's unlike anything he can remember. There is a freezer full of food, good food, rich and filling, not dry goods or cheap take out. The variety is outlandish, and it's just... there. He doesn't have to buy it, or try and cook it himself. He just re-heats it and it's done.

Itachi, he knows, is reveling in the abundance of sweets and assortment of drinks that are simply waiting to be sampled. Last night he found his partner-his cold, callous, *mass-murdering* partner-surrounded by four separate cups of tea, and a veritable mountain of candy. He seemed totally at ease as in the sac chair, making his way through the library she seemed to have accumulated in the den.

And the rooms... First of all, there is an absurd amount of bedding in this house. There are more beds and futons than there are rooms, and there are five bedrooms. He doesn't know why the house has five rooms, considering three seem barely touched, and Zabuzza's suspiciously un-lived in, but there are, and all of the bedding fits him.

Him. All one hundred ninety three centimeters . It's preposterous.

There are luxuries he didn't even know he was missing until he had them there. Two different soaps, one for body and one for hair, and towels that weren't worn through to thread. Snack foods to consume is his time of boredom, instead of large meals. Nail clippers, instead of the edge of a kunai. An actual washing machine and dryer instead of a stream and the wind, or worse, nothing at all.

It feels like living in some sort of strange dream, because he doesn't need to question where his next meal is coming from, or if there are going to be any patrols he needs to avoid. He's free to choose any number of leisure activities, but he can't choose. He finds himself just wandering about, falling into a strange schedule of training,

checking on the other two inhabitants, and securing the perimeter several times a day.

It's on one of these jaunts that he finds himself experiencing one of the strangest things in his life. He's coming in from the beach, cleaning the sand from his feet, and Itachi and Ryuishi are lounging at the table, sharing a bowl of something between them.

It would be strange enough if he left it at that, but the amicable atmosphere between the two isn't the oddest thing-no, it's the loose cloak that adorns the woman's frame. It's too big by far, sliding off one shoulder, revealing a long expanse of bronze skin. With her hair pulled up into a bun, all it seems to do is draw attention to her slender neck.

She's cinched his Akatsuki cloak around the waist with some sort of make-shift fabric belt, her bare leg stretching out to the side of her, and he's both appalled and something else. He can't name it, but it stirs lazily in his gut like a particularly pleased feline.

She seems to notice where his attention is, and she grins, tilting a bit as if to show off the cloud designs, preening in that way she has. "It's my trophy," she brags. "A once grand uniform now demoted to dressing gown. It probably meant something significant once, but now it means that I don't want to put on real clothes."

He hums, because she's right that it once meant something to put that cloak on, and it still stings that it was false. He also doesn't want to think about what she considers to be real clothes.

"You seem well," he observes, while she leans forward to take a bite out of whatever is in the bowl.

"I would say as good as new, almost ready to get going again," she says.

Itachi removes the spoon he was sucking clean from his mouth quietly, going to take another scoop. "She called me Keiko for three

hours today," he says blandly, not even blinking.

Kisame frowns, and he takes in the tense line of her shoulders, and the way she will no longer meet his eye. She looks angered by the statement, and embarrassed, no longer content to eat the sweet in front of her.

"Ryuishi," he says quietly. It's only been a little while since she began her regular dosages again, and though the changes are marked, she isn't there yet.

"I'm fine," she snaps, not facing either of them. "His hair is like hers was and it threw me, okay? That's all."

He approaches cautiously, coming in closer, and he notes that she's put her spoon down, her fingers now uneasily drumming on her thigh. A tense sort of silence reigns as he settles himself down at the end of the table.

"The beach is nice," he tries, changing the subject completely. "Almost long enough to need a mount to cross it all." Silently, he wants to give up. A mount? What need do ninja have for mounts? They cross whole countries on their feet, what good is a horse going to do?

Ryuishi snorts, resting her chin in the palm of her hand, but glancing out of the side of her eyes at him. "Usually I just ride Zabuzza," she drawls, and then there is another long, awkward silence. Kisame isn't exactly how to take those words, because he has pondered the nature of that relationship more than times he can count.

"Do you sleep with him?" Itachi wonders, interrupting the silence, and this time, she snorts.

"What? Kisame didn't tell you? We all used to sleep together. Every night, or at least when we could," Ryuishi states bluntly.

Itachi hums, and he slides his eyes over to his partner. They are blank, eerily so, but after so many years, Kisame can pick up on the accusation in them.

He flushes, because the way she said it makes it sound horrible, but it at least answers his question in a roundabout manner. "She means actual sleeping, and we stopped after we hit puberty for obvious reasons," he tries to explain.

"Ah, but that's changed since you've been away. I'm fairly certain I've woken to Zabuza jabbing me in the thigh more times than I can count. These days I just roll over and go back to sleep," she says nonchalantly, and Kisame sputters while Itachi spoons himself another bite of the bowl's contents.

"That's-! That's entirely indecent!"

She shrugs, unbothered by it, but seemingly amused by his reaction. A small grin works itself onto the corners of her lips. "I have an unfortunate number of male companions, commander," she says lazily. "And since I can't produce my own warmth, I steal theirs at night. Sometimes that means waking up to certain pieces of their anatomy acting independently and jabbing me in the thigh. It doesn't always happen, but it does occur after several years of knowing someone."

Itachi leans forward conspiratorially. "Did captain...?"

She laughs, turning to face them fully once more, leaning over as if to share a juicy piece of gossip. Kisame listens in muted second-hand shame and bewilderment as she talks.

"Did Hatake ever raise a tent to greet the morning with? Absolutely, but he usually wakes up earlier than I do, so it's not a problem." She pauses for a moment, then sighs. "Man, I should be better friends with the Mizukage. Admittedly she probably wouldn't wake like that, but there's something to be said-"

"Excuse me," Kisame interrupts loudly, placing his hands flat on the table. "Did you just admit to associating with Hatake Kakashi, who apparently is Itachi's old captain?"

The two in front of him wince, and he is reminded once more that there is something between them, a history that he doesn't know of. Now seems like a good time to address that.

"Actually, I said-" Ryuishi tries, attempting to derail his train of thought. He doesn't fall for it, focusing on the matter at hand.

"Yes," Itachi interrupts, cutting her off once again. She glares at the younger man, who watches the swordsman through solemn eyes.

Kisame is caught, because he doesn't know which to address first. He feels as if he should inform Ryuishi that there are certain connotations that come with sleeping in people's beds, and by societal standards, it's completely unacceptable to wake up in such a fashion. She may have educated the unit about puberty, but it seems like she is twenty years too late to receive an explanation on how things can be interpreted in a sexual manner. Thinking about it some more, he probably needs to have that talk with Zabuza as well.

However, it has been bothering him for sometime that there is a history between these two that has gone unexplained. Itachi is his partner, has stuck beside him through thick and thin, and Ryuishi is his old teammate. They shouldn't even know each other, let alone have done something together that leads to the sort of peaceful atmosphere where they can share a bowl of food in amicable silence.

"How is it, Itachi, that you were able to get your hands on those pills before you even knew what happened?" Kisame finally says, and his partner does not waver in his gaze, or hesitate in his answer.

"I had already opened a line of communication between her allies and myself," Itachi confesses without hesitation. "I planned on supplying her without your knowledge."

Kisame frowns, because he doesn't trust easily, and in a way, Itachi broke that trust. From the sound of it, the entire time Kisame was wrongly attempting to fix Ryuishi, Itachi was going behind the Akatsuki's back. But it explains, at least, why Zabuza didn't come running after her. If a messenger came bearing her words to soothe him, he would stay his hunt for a little while.

"Why would you? You aren't a double agent, I know that much, but how do you two know each other? Is it through Orochimaru?"

"No," Itachi denies. "Not him."

"Then what?" Kisame wonders.

"-Then nothing," Ryuishi says, answering before Itachi can say anything. "Because it's not any of your damn business, Kisame."

Kisame turns to her, and he notices her white-knuckled grip on her thigh, her fingers digging bruises into her skin. There is a certain set to her jaw, and a rhythm to her breathing that isn't usually there.

"Watanabe-san, you can tell him," Itachi says softly. It's almost gentle, even, and it's not a voice Kisame has heard the boy use before.

"No. He doesn't get to waltz right back in and know everything. He doesn't get to learn things I have kept in the dark forever, and he doesn't get to question the character of the people I know, not after he did what he did," she says adamantly, but there is strain in her voice, and he knows she's hurtling towards an episode. There is fear and panic in her eyes, and a compulsive need to hoard her information.

"You're right," Kisame says, because she is. He doesn't have the right to come into her home, to bring her back broken and sick, and then demand things of her. He hasn't earned anything at all, let alone secrets she has clung to for years.

For a moment, she looks shocked, as if she was expecting to fight tooth and nail for the space she clearly needs. Confusion etches itself across her features, along with the remains of anger and frustration, and he notices her eyes dart to the side as she grits her teeth, looking for a way to push the fight onward. He reaches out instinctively to steady her, to remind her that there is no need to fight. It takes him only a few seconds to realize what he is doing, and he goes to draw his hand away, unsure how she will react to his touch.

He does not expect her shaky sigh, and the feeling of her leaning against his arm, her head bowed so that her bangs fall forward and tickle the skin of his wrist. He's sure the surprise is etched out on his face, because she had to lean forward to reach him, meaning she sought it out.

"Idiot," she mumbles quietly, relaxing against him. Her words sound like a curse, or maybe a nickname.

Itachi coughs pointedly, and Kisame feels himself flush the tiniest bit, because he almost forgot his partner of five years was also in the room. He glances over to the boy, who seems to send a pointed glance between the two of them, raising his brow questioningly.

Kisame glares. He doesn't need this from a kid ten years his junior.

Itachi just gives him that trademark deadpan stare, the one that says the people around him are being obtuse and stubborn, but he doesn't force his agenda anymore than he already has. Instead, he initiates another long-overdue conversation.

"Watanabe-san," he begins, "If you won't answer that, what *will* you explain?"

She twitches, and Kisame can feel her muscles tense beneath his fingertips. It's an incredibly strange sensation, one he isn't sure he's comfortable with, and he's suddenly filled with a sense of anticipation and dread. Not because of the touch, but because this is something

he's also been wondering. Itachi essentially prompted her to tell them whatever she feels comfortable with.

Ryuishi feels hesitant, and she savours the heat of Kisame's palms for a moment longer. She doesn't want to say anything at all, and the world is still a bit off-kilter. However, she knows she can't just shove thirteen years inside the back of her head and pretend like they never happened. Keeping secrets of that magnitude is how the disaster in River happened, and it's the reason she lost Gaara. She doesn't want to lose anyone else, and that desire outweighs her want to keep secrets.

Still, she's not going to just blurt it all out there. No, she'll just mumble through as much censored shit as she can get through until she stumbles upon one of those great mental landmines known as triggers, or her mind decides to conjure up ghosts to haunt her.

Ryuishi takes a deep breath, and gets started.

Surprisingly, sneaking out during the Hokage's announcement is actually the easiest part.

Haku is entirely too knowledgeable about exit routines and stealth, in Sasuke's opinion. It's an admirable trait, and compressing their chakra coils is something they learned when Kakashi-sensei found it worth his time to train them instead of passively hand them activities. The group does it as a whole, and Naruto leaves several hinged clones behind as they make their way through the sewers, of all things. Haku is insistent that the pungent odor will help mask their smell as they weave through the sludge-filled tunnels and make their way through filtering stations. He's also sure that scent will be the last of their worries once they get started.

He's right.

Sasuke prides himself on his skills. He was top of his class-or, top of the male half of the graduating class. The Yamanaka girl and Sakura

tied for first on the female side, and he's not sure who won overall. He's only gotten better since then as well, with rigorous training and drills. He and his team are a finely honed machine, and they cover each other's weaknesses. Where Sakura lacks of stamina, Naruto carries it in spades, and where Sasuke lacks strategy, she makes up for it. It also factors in things like genjutsu, which Naruto seems to fail in completely, but he and Sakura have at least some promise. Sasuke will admit he's no good at gathering intelligence, or healing, but Naruto can pull secrets out of just about any situation, and Sakura healed a four inch gash just the other day. (It was on a feline, but it counts.)

The thing is, he's good. His team is also acceptable, but the pace that Haku sets once they escape the outer walls is absolutely insane.

It makes sense, since he's been travelling alongside two jounin-level ninja for so long, but even the Suna team is hard pressed to keep up with the boy as he skims across tree branches and river surfaces. He doesn't even stop when they have been traveling at a breakneck pace for twelve hours straight, and everybody is drenched in sweat. No, he just leads them all to a lake to wash their scent away, throws a few ration bars around, and keeps going.

"Where are we going?" Sakura demands at some point during the eighteenth hour, when their stamina has flagged and the direction is still unclear.

"Land of Waves," Haku says curtly. "We can lose any trackers in the port city near the new bridge. The workers are still around, and it's big enough that our faces won't be remembered. There are enough people to mask our signatures."

"How much longer until then?" Temari asks, worn from the exams and now this.

Haku glances back, and the Uchiha sees his grimace at the group. He bristles under the judgemental stare, because not everybody grew up as the ward of two missing-nin. It's not like they had the

opportunity to learn how to avoid patrols at the feet of two people who were legendary for it.

"At this pace? Days," he mumbles, and Sakura makes a keening noise that Sasuke understands completely. They can't keep this up for days. Haku seems to read this from them, and he makes an impatient clucking noise, unsticking his tongue from the roof of his mouth.

"We can rest for a couple hours near a set of rapids I know, but you will only regret it if we do," he says, but the teams take him up on the offer greedily. Only Naruto and Gaara seem hesitant about stopping, but Sasuke is beginning to believe that Naruto runs on the power of improbability, and that Gaara has found a way to utilize meditative silence as an energy source.

The moment they reach said rapids-an incredible torrent of water that spews out of the land of Rivers and carves through the earth-Sasuke runs through cool downs stretches, crams water and food down his mouth, and crashes. He doesn't even manage to stay awake to hear who will be on watch, and his only consolation is that both Sakura, the Suna Kunoichi, and the puppeteer seem to be on the same page. His last conscious thought is that it seems strange to have Naruto make so many clones, only to send them away.

He wakes up an unspecified amount of time later, shaken awake by Gaara, and he feels even worse than when he fell asleep. His body is screaming at him, his muscles worn and sore. Everything hurts from their sprint.

Haku simply jerks his head at Sakura, who is whimpering as she rubs a salve into her calves. He doesn't even need to say 'I told you so', not when the results are so pronounced.

By the time the group reaches the port city in Wave Country, Sasuke can't even feel his legs anymore, and he can barely keep his eyes open. He doesn't even need to worry about compressing his chakra, because it's almost all gone.

Naruto, annoyingly enough, just sort of looks tired, like he woke up too early. In fact, he has enough chakra to pull that same clone trick several more times at Haku's request, producing hoards to send out in random directions, carrying pieces of everybody's clothing. At least Sasuke understands why Haku had them pack so many now, but he wishes the other boy had told them beforehand. Sasuke doubts he will ever see those socks again.

His only consolation is that Haku seems to finally be reaching the limits of his stamina, and once he manages to magically secure them adjoining rooms in what could possibly be the shadiest inn Sasuke has ever seen, he collapses onto a worn futon, and he doesn't get back up.

Which leaves the rest of the group sorta out of their depth, because they've been traveling nonstop for days now, and everybody is exhausted and in pain, and nobody really understands what they are doing in some dingy hotel in the Land of Waves.

Sakura seems to take the wheel on this one, because she walks right up to door between rooms and throws it open. "If you're going to kill us, make it fast," she tells the unflinching, unmoved redhead who seems to be the only one still awake. Then she sort of fumbles over to where Haku is and throws herself down on the futon, too lazy to get another one out. Sasuke creeps his way over and decides that because they are all adolescents, the three of them should fit in one adult fuuton.

Naruto decides to make it four.

It's only after he wakes for the second time, disoriented and out of sorts that anything gets explained, and that's after the group has been rushed through some strange sort of morning routine that consists of bathing in the grimy shower stall, changing clothes, eating, and rubbing more salve into their sore, sore muscles.

They sit in a miserable circle around a map, and connect in a way that only those suffering the same misery can. He doesn't even mind

the puppeteer sprawling out in his personal space, because Sasuke understands his pain. He understands the horrible ache that no amount of stretching seems to relieve.

"Why on earth did we need to push so hard?" grumbles Sakura, who keeps rubbing her legs in the vain hope that they will stop aching.

"Because Konoha specializes in highly trained tracking teams, and there are a few people in this group who don't seem to understand minimal chakra use," Haku explains, casting a glance at Naruto, who seems enraptured by the view outside their window. Wave country is foggy, even in mid afternoon, so there isn't much to see other than the new bridge that seems to stretch on forever, and a bustle of people in the streets below.

"And what? We had to outrun them?" Temari asks crabily, picking at the plate of fish in front of her with a displeased face. It's unsurprising, considering it smells about as good as the briny water outside. Which is to say, it doesn't smell good at all.

"As a group, that's not possible. However, we could confuse them with the clones and outlast them long enough to lose them here," he answers. "Tonight we make another push, but a bit slower. Hopefully only a full day's travel south before we can rest again."

"South is towards Wind Country," Gaara comments placidly, his eyes on the map. "Is Aneue there?"

"Before we go hunting her down, there are some things you need to know," Haku says carefully as his finger traces the coastline downward. "The woman you call Aneue is much, much more than what you think."

"No shit. The lady we know as a candy trader is also the Lady of Oto," Kankuro snorts, groaning when the sound causes his stomach muscles to spasm. Sasuke feels a brief moment of pity, but then it is gone, leaving him wondering if he ever felt it at all.

"And the Rakki Ryuu, and the Kiri no Ningyo," Naruto states passingly, shocking the Suna team. The blonde girl seems to make a strange heaving noise in surprise, the fish in her mouth going down the wrong pipe, and even Gaara seems to intake air.

Temari coughs wildly until Haku cups his hand and slaps her once on the back, and it seems to dislodge the chewed morsel, which she hack up into her hand. Naruto make a sound of bewildered disgust as the kunoichi ignores the chewed bits of food in her palm in favor of turning to stare at them all.

"I'm sorry," she croaks, "Did you just say Kiri no Ningyo? As in, youngest missing-nin in history, part of the combat team that shocked Suna forces in the Third Shinobi war, *known for acute mental torture*, Kiri no Ningyo?"

"We were pretty surprised too," Sakura says understandingly.

"Why was she selling candy?" Kankuro demands. "WHat purpose could it possibly serve?"

Haku listens to the protests with a serene sort of silence, as if none of it phases him. His eyes are glued to the piece of paper in front of them all, his long, slender finger hovering over one spot.

"She is as she is, as are all of us," Haku announces, and there is a strange bit of quiet after that. Sasuke watches the ice release user and he notices the boy is no longer staring at the paper, but through it.

"Why are you saying this?" Gaara asks him.

"Because realizing that everyone is just as multifaceted as she is is essential to understand how her mind works," Haku answers. "The place I am bringing you was the center of all of these lives, and it will be where we find clues, if there are any to be found."

"What is this place?" Sasuke says, finally breaking his silence.

Haku looks contemplative. "A house. Where she lived and worked at times. Where I grew up."

Everybody takes a moment to wonder what kind of place it will be, and the images they conjure inside their minds vary. Some imagine a sterile, spartan building filled with files and cabinets with passcodes and traps beyond imagination, and others a shack with no more than one big room where all the work is done. It varies, but each adolescent feels apprehension stir in their gut. It's the den of the beast, the center of the mystery. Every step they take brings them closer to finding her.

It's long after they resume traveling, near the border of the swamp, that Haku realizes that he can sense three very faint, familiar chakra signatures on the peripheral of his range, following behind the squads. And it's very unfortunate for them that Tenzō can sense seven signatures fleeing in the distance ahead.

"Your team is here," the man comments to his senpai.

Kakashi chokes. " *WHAT?! " " "*

"There are three others... I think they might be from the chuunin exams?" he says hesitantly, unsure of the unknowns. They don't seem completely foreign to him, like they have brushed against his senses recently.

"Haku," Zabuza says darkly. He had hoped that Ryuishi's skill at instigating chaos hadn't rubbed off on the boy, but now he realizes he is truly her child. He's going to nip this habit in the bud before it gets anymore out of hand. He can't juggle two schemers of that level.

"I'm sorry, are you telling me there are genin towards where an unstable A-rank kunoichi may be bedded down, possibly accompanied by more than one S-rank defector?" Kakashi says, more than a tad hysterically.

"Ah," Tenzō remarks blandly. "That does sound pretty bad."

Zabuza just grunts, picking up speed. They must have been racing from Konoha to beat jounin here, even if they did start in Kumo.

No matter. They won't get much farther, not if he can do anything about it.

AN: I had a longer authors note here but FF removed it, so.

Thanks lurkers, thanks favoriters and followers. Many blessings reviewers, may your tables always be full.

Enbi is best beta. Enbi is air.

In Which there is A Reunion

I do not own Naruto.

Ryuishi is fairly certain at this point, her life is pretty much a cheap TV drama that keeps spiraling out of control. She's half expecting an evil twin to pop up somewhere, or a bastard child of Orochimaru to come knocking. Or, perhaps, some sort of strange lover lost many years ago that she also doesn't remember because of a tragic punch to the cranium. Hell, she's been punched in the head enough it just might be plausible.

Honestly, she's fairly certain she's sick of the overwhelming complicated mess that her life has become, and she's contemplating just... not. As in, buying a boat, figuring out how to sail, and setting sights for whatever the fuck lies across the ocean in this world, everything else be damned. Sure, she'll most likely die, but the void is a low-key terror that consumes her all the time. In fact, she might say she's ready to let it consume her.

Alright, probably not, but damn if shit isn't complicated like woah.

Orochimaru has the right of it, she thinks. There's no purpose in life, but if you live long enough, you might find something that holds your interest. It's really unfortunate that she found *people* interesting, though, and that instead of experimentation, societal upheaval tended to be more her forte. Beakers and biology would have never taken away her medication, or tried to kill her. Chemistry and psychology may be complicated, but there was a reason for it. In the end, things were explainable, they had a formula, a reason. True, people had reasons, but they weren't a uniform molecule or tidy hormone, they were balls of weird habits all trying to accomplish their goals at once, both together and separately. They fit patterns, but sometimes they just did shit in order to *do it*.

She stares out at the ocean, letting the sun warm her skin and seep into her bones, and wonders what the fuck she is supposed to do now. She's well on her way to recovery, and in a week or two, she'll have to give some final answers and do some major repairs.

Honestly, she has no idea how things are going in the outside world right now. She was able to get Itachi to send one crow to one place with some twigs and dirt, but she wasn't allowed to do anything more. Kisame and Itachi are both paranoid out the ass about the Akatsuki, and stressors triggering another breakdown on her part. They aren't giving her any information at all (if they themselves even know what is going on).

Hopefully Orochimaru has been his miraculous self and kept their village running. Theoretically, it shouldn't be too hard to stabilize the markets long enough for her to return, and he's always been great at manipulating people, which should help with explaining her absence.

She prays that Kagami hasn't gone off the deep end and spilled the tea on just about everybody, which is an option she has. Ryuishi knows that the old woman is self-serving enough that she probably wouldn't spark a war, if only because it might hamper how she lives her life.

The kids should be alright, sorted out with their various protectors and guardians. Obviously, she has to go to Suna first to stop the tribe from spiriting Gaara away, but then again, she actually has no clue how much time has passed, or where the tribe is and how long it will take them to get to Suna from wherever they are.

Everything might be fine, or it might be on fire. It's Schrödinger's reality out there.

On a more personal note, she really has no idea what to do about Kisame and Itachi. Obviously, they can't go back to the Akatsuki, but she's sorta unsure where they could go, then. She feels like she could lie to everyone and tell them it was an elaborate scheme of

hers all along, but not only is Kisame an uptight asshole about the whole lying thing, but she's pretty sure nobody would buy it.

It would be easy to set Itachi up in some remote house where he could live peacefully for the rest of his days if he pleased, seeing how much he enjoys lazing around her house, but she doubts he'll go for it. And Kisame is another issue entirely. On one hand, she feels betrayed, wounded, and inconceivably angry at him. She waited for his blue ass for thirteen years, and he showed up to metaphorically punch her in the throat and start this huge ass mess. He agreed when that orange-masked menace took away her pills, kept her in a cell, instigated a horrible breakdown, and he wants to talk about stuff. Stuff like feelings and emotions and issues.

On the other hand, he didn't forget his unit for thirteen years, tried to bring them back together, and had the best of intentions. The asswipe is genuinely sorry and attempted to rectify his mistakes by blatantly telling her he will go if she so desires, displaying his respect for her autonomy. He also broke her out of the Akatsuki base and defected for her, and isn't completely wrong when he says that there are things she needs to work on. So she doesn't want him gone, more like she wants to kick him in the dick every time she remembers what he put her through.

She squints her eyes, staring at the blue man nervously pacing the surf with his sword, and wonders if that's her answer. Justice could be a punch in the dick for every single moment of hell he brought on her. A lifetime of consequence-free ball shots, strikes right to his most sensitive area in order to right the wrongs he has committed.

He whirls around, and at first she thinks it is some sort of strange psychic phenomenon where he sensed her thoughts, but then she realizes he's looking off to the treeline pensively, a confused expression on his face.

She quirks a brow, and then he's making his way over to her, long legs eating up the distance, looking perturbed. His feet kick up spray, and then sand, and she briefly wonders why he bothered to wear his

sandals. It doesn't escape her notice that he broadcasts his movements as he gets closer, allowing her to read his intent from the sway of his limbs. His shadow falls down over her, and his gross, smelly sword shifts uneasily in its casing.

Samehada does not especially like her, for whatever reason. She thinks it's because of her chakra, but whenever it is near her, its surface ripples into spikes, and it hisses lowly in warning. Kisame attempts to soothe it with low words and gentle pats, but usually, they just don't share space.

For now, the weapon curls around its master's arm, and it hides behind his legs like a coward. If it had eyes, she's sure they would be watching her warily, ears perked and fur bristling.

"Ryuishi," he says in a calm, controlled voice. "Who knows about this place again?"

She looks up at him, curious. "Zabuza, our ward, and Kagami. That's it."

He hums, his eyes darting back to the mangrove swamp, and she pushes herself up to stand across from him, casting her gaze that way as well. She can't see or sense anything, but that doesn't mean much.

"Spit it out," she commands, and he glances back to her, gripping his sword just a little bit tighter. She can literally see him pondering if this information is going to stress her out or not. "Kisame..." she draws out in warning, but he obviously chooses wrong.

"It's nothing you need to worry about," he tells her, reaching out to pat her back with his free hand. "Can you go see if Itachi will wake up and go on a walk with me?"

She gives him absolutely no warning when she shifts her weight forward, appearing to be going to slam a right hook into his ribs. Faster and stronger than her, he blocks the fist, but the simultaneous

knee rising to slam into his crotch is not so easily dodged. He lets out a retching noise, trying to curl in on himself while his grip remains tight on her fist. She stares apathetically at him as he heaves and decides that yes, this is her justice. A lifetime of free nut shots.

"Don't," he wheezes, fingers curled around her hand like a vice.

"What?" she wonders, and her answer comes in the form of distant noise. She turns toward the mangrove swamp, and a flock of birds takes off from the canopy, little black specks against the blue sky.

"Not Zabuza," he groans, and she frowns, because he knows Zabuza's signature. Her mind goes through the short list of people it could be, and even though he's technically on the list, she really doesn't expect to see a familiar blur hopping through the tangled roots of the swamp.

She sucks in a breath, and her heart skips a beat in her chest, because she doesn't know how long it has been, but it has definitely been *far too long*. Her eyesight isn't good enough to pick up the flicker of surprise that races over his face, or the way it turns into desperate longing, but it doesn't matter because *that is her child* and *oh*, she has missed him so.

"Haku," she breathes, and she wrenches her arm, trying to free it from Kisame's grasp. It takes a moment of violent jiggling and her other hand to do so, but she manages to escape him as he hunches over to catch the breath she knocked out of him.

"Wait!" Kisame croaks, but she's already gone, racing across the beach, praying that this isn't some delusion her mind has conjured up. Her bare feet burn just the slightest bit as she crosses the hot sand, but she ignores it in favor of focusing on the cry of delight that escapes his lips as he picks up even more speed and vaults toward her.

Ryuishi laughs as she throws herself forward, meeting Haku in the middle of the stretch of earth, and they crash together in a tangle of

limbs. He's sweaty and dirty as he buries himself in her shirt, gibbering away as she peppers him with kisses. It doesn't matter that he smells like mud and his clothes are spattered in muck, only that his arms are solid around her, squeezing the breath out of her, and he's *real*, so real.

"Nee-san!" another voice shrieks, and she has a second to register a streak of orange in her peripherals before more weight is thrown against her, making her stumble back to keep her footing, and then a blond head joins the hug, wriggling its way into her grasp, cheeks pinks from exertion.

"I didn't know you were here, you were gone and they took you," says Haku, beginning to babble, and his fingers tighten on her like he intends to never let go again, and she is perfectly fine with that.

"You're okay, you're okay. I thought they hurt you and I was gonna find you, Nee-san. You're never allowed to go anywhere ever again," Naruto chatters, and then there are more bodies throwing themselves at her, and she sees bright pink, black, and surprisingly even crimson red.

She cannot stand under the weight of so many, and she crumples into the sand that seems to vibrate with excitement, brought alive by Gaara, who she never expected to see again. She doesn't say a word as she attempts to wrap herself around each and every child, raining kisses down on tired, dirty faces.

"My babies, my children," she blubbers, definitely not crying all over them. In fact, she denies that anyone is crying at all, even the older Suna siblings, who stand apart from the main group, not misty eyed or anything.

"What are you doing here?" she chokes out, bewildered, and several voices attempt to explain at once, half of them garbled because they are crushed into her chest or shoulders, little hands pawing and clutching.

"Hmnb h hdddng hohgn," Naruto's muffled voice comes out, his words spoken against her ribs, distorted and incomprehensible. She feels his slobber on her skin, and she isn't even mad.

"-and then you were gone and Naruto went crazy, so we had to find you-" Sakura bawls directly into her ear, her snot leaking into the sand and her pretty pink hair directly in Ryuishi's face.

"-Sensei and Zabuza and Misaki left and there was something about hearts and then Suna-" Sasuke adds wetly, and she's genuinely touched, because he's a constipated little turd and he isn't crying but he certainly is moved, oh Tali-

"They *what?* " she suddenly gasps, catching onto Sasuke's words. They just left the children? Under whose supervision? *Orochimaru's?*

"-won the chuunin exams and you weren't there, and they said we would find you but I didn't expect this-" Gaara mumbles, and she feels her anger cool and twist, turn into compassion and love. She runs her hands through his hair gently, cooing softly at him. He had every right to be angry, to not want her anymore, but he is here, her precious boy.

"It's okay," Ryuishi assures them, doling out more back rubs and cheek kisses alongside her nuzzling and hair carding. "It's okay, I can deal with those idiots later. I'm so glad you are here, and that you're safe, oh Kami I've missed you-"

Kankuro coughs from where he is standing over the group, beside his sister. "Uh, actually... We may have been racing them here."

Ryuishi freezes underneath the pile, her heart rate picking up speed, her eyes going wide. She looks to Temari, who seems to be wishing for a camera of some sorts to capture the moment, if only for blackmail purposes. As a sister, Ryuishi understands.

The girl shrugs, crossing her arms, staring down at her. "Gaara and Naruto ran interference with sand and shadow clones, but I don't

think it will last long, especially now that their concentration is gone. The trio seemed to navigate this place better than us. Being jounin and all, it must be simple for them to dodge all the poisonous bugs, clouds of biting insects, venomous snakes, and carnivorous crocodiles. That's not even mentioning all the traps that were set. You picked one heck of a natural defense lady. If it weren't for Haku, we probably wouldn't have made it through."

"Thanks," Ryuishi croaks out weakly. "I like your new hair."

Temari, who now seems to be sporting two short, spiky pigtails, sends her a savage grin and raises a hand to brush them gently. "Oto has some savage ninja. Fairly certain he was going for my neck," she says confidently.

"Oh," Ryuishi says lamely, covered in children and feeling vaguely responsible.

The awkward, if exuberant reunion between Ryuishi and the children is interrupted when a familiar war cry cuts through the air, and a malevolent chakra bursts into life heavy enough for Ryuishi to register it on her pathetic senses. She has the briefest of moments to feel comforted by Zabuza's demonic presence before she remembers that Kisame is still on the beach and has probably been giving her space to be mauled in peace by kids.

She lifts up her head enough to see that he is accompanied by two more men, and she realizes that this happy-go-lucky atmosphere is about to turn into an absolute shitshow of epic proportions.

"Up," she states suddenly, scrambling for purchase with her feet, hooking a child under each arm. Sakura gasps as she is lifted from the ground and clutches tightly to Ryushi's shoulders while Sasuke manages to shimmy out of reach. It leaves her with Naruto in one arm, and Gaara in another while Haku wipes his face and clutches to her wrist.

"Up up, everybody into the house," she orders, kicking up sand. Behind her, somebody-Kakashi, maybe?-seems to shout something about her being alive, but she ignores it, motioning the rest onward with her head and breaking out into a run.

"Holy shit," Kankuro breathes, craning his head around to watch the show behind him. She hears the ringing of metal on metal, and feels a surge of powerful chakra. It's only the fact that she is literally surrounded by kids and her house is right in front of her that keeps her from breaking into a horrible flashback.

"Are you alright?" Temari asks, noticing the way her face has twisted into a grimace of effort, and the others let out sounds of worry as they scramble up onto the steps of the front porch.

"Yep-well. Nope. Not at all. If I start acting weird, take the kids and leave me in whatever room I'm in. Don't get close and try and stay out of my way," she orders, opening the door with her toes. Sakura makes an impressed noise, either at Ryuishi's weird toe skill or the first glimpse inside her home. Whatever it happens to be, Ryuishi ignores it, ushering everyone inside.

She manages to finally smash the two teams into her dining room before she realizes the gaping hole in her plan. Or rather, Sasuke points out the flaw with a bewildered, angry shout.

" *ITACHI?!* " he yells, and at once, everybody whirls to face the teen standing in her hallway, looking like a deer caught in the headlights of an oncoming car.

She would have really liked to freeze time there, because she has never ever in her life seen Itachi caught so unprepared for anything. His hair is still a bit mussed up from his nap, and he's halfway to cramming on his sandal, obviously having felt Kisame's distress flare and the three hostile chakra signatures. He probably didn't sense the children, because as drained and tired as they were from pushing so hard, they were probably smothered out almost completely by the massive giants outside spewing chakra all over.

Ryuishi takes a moment to memorize his black eyes widened in shock, and his slack jaw before she drops Naruto, who lands with a yelp, and snatches the back of Sasuke's shirt. "Hey, Kisame probably needs some help. Three on one is a bit unfair, and somebody needs to explain the situation."

Itachi blinks, staring at his little brother, then looks up to her. He nods once, finishes stuffing his shoe on, and bolts through the door so quick that she only registers the whoosh of air across her face. She didn't even see him move.

"WHAT IS HE DOING HERE?" Sasuke shouts as she kicks the door closed behind her. Outside, she hears the sound of one thousand birds chirping over one another, and the flash of blue that comes through her window lets her know Kakashi has whipped out his Chidori already. Things have escalated quickly.

"Alright everybody, shoes off, nobody go outside. Five fighters that are at least jounin level each are having a bit of a pissing contest outside, no place for mere mortals such as us, but feel free to open the windows and practice your long range targeting skills," she singsongs, dragging Sasuke along and setting Gaara gently on his feet. He blinks languidly and looks around, taking in the dining room and kitchen.

"Is this your house?" he asks her, and she does a Zabuzza-style grunt in response while she wrestles with Sasuke, who seems to be perfectly willing to try and slip out of his shirt to chase his brother. She mentally applauds his efforts, but she also realizes that outside is not a place for genin, or even chuunin right now. Hell, even she probably would get wrecked, and that's why she's letting Itachi explain everything. As long as nobody does any serious disemboweling or decapitations, Haku will probably be able to fix them up enough to last the journey to a better healer.

"Sasuke," she says in a low voice, trying to soothe him. "We gotta stay inside now."

"THAT WAS *ITACHI*," he shrieks at her with crazed eyes, and she nods at him, reaching out to snatch his wrists and pin them behind his back. He tries to kick off the ground and possibly knee her in the face, but she ducks the strike and kicks his legs out from under him when he goes to land again. She uses her weight to smash him belly down on the ground while he shouts wordlessly in rage.

"Somebody get me restraints before he goes out there and gets himself killed," she bites out, and maybe she's being a little more rough than strictly necessary, but she's trying her best to do this peacefully and he isn't helping.

She keeps him from harming himself by all the thrashing he's doing, and she'll admit he's gotten stronger than when she last played around with him. His bucking actually makes her strain a little bit to keep her place, and he's really dedicated to getting out.

Haku, at least, seems to see the logic in her choice, and immediately begins doling out some bandages, which she winds around the Uchiha's elbows and forearms to act as cushion for the zip cords that will come next. She does the same ankle to knee on him, and she knows that those improvised holds will be a bitch and a half to get out of for anybody who can't dislocate their joints like her and Orochimaru.

When she stands again, she hauls Sasuke up near the table, using some odds and ends to prop him up, and glances around the room to keep a headcount. Everyone is still here, curiously glancing around.

"Soooo..." Temari drawls, ever the responsible one. "Are you okay now?"

"Honestly..." She looks at her shaking hand and tries to collect her thoughts. "Not sure. My head's a bit of a mess. Who wants tea and real food? You all look exhausted."

"You can say that again," Sakura announces, peeking out the bay window around Sasuke, who glares daggers at his teammate. "I'm honestly surprised he had enough energy to do that."

"Yes, well, emotions," Ryuishi says almost ruefully, citing from experience. Then she travels away from the vantage point and busies herself in the kitchen. She needs to throw herself into something sickeningly domestic and calm herself before she does anything else.

She feels a cool hand close over her arm, and she stills as Haku seems to scan her over with a careful eye. Her heart swells in her chest, and she raises her hand to brush some travel grit off of his cheek with her thumb.

"Oh Haku," she says softly. He needs a shower, and he looks so *tired* . They all do.

He raises his hand to clasp hers to his cheek, leaning into it, and his eyes seem to note everything about her. She's reminded that he's a medic-nin, and that he can probably see that something is off.

"What happened?" he whispers, keeping his voice low. "They took you, and now you're here, and... I've never felt Zabuza so mad."

She leans down to rest her chin on his head, reaching around to trap him in a hug, and she doesn't answer. It's getting harder and harder to tuck him into her neck, and she's afraid that one day he'll be too big for it, but also happy that he'll live to grow that tall. It's bittersweet.

The boy bites his lip. "The man outside-"

"Rest," she interrupts. "Take a shower, let me cook for you. Please."

"Alright," he says tiredly, squeezing her back. "Alright."

"Me too, dattebayo!" Naruto interjects, and she hears the pounding of his feet across the floor. She huffs out a quiet laugh as he launches himself into the kitchen, throwing his hands into the sink to wash them clean. "I'm gonna help too!"

"Yeah?" she says as Haku peels himself away from her, slinking around to place his hands under the spray of water as well. She joins them, bumping Naruto with her hip and sudsing up her hands.

"Is there a shower?" Sakura asks hopefully.

"Down the hall, second door on your left," Haku answers, and the pinkette lets out a cheer of delight as she disappears, leaving Sasuke to seethe at the table.

Gaara, she notices, takes up a seat at the counter, staring meaningfully at her with his big seafoam green eyes while his siblings take spots near the window to watch the fight outside. She would warn them about the dangers of doing such a thing, but if any of the combatants are stupid enough to bring the fight closer to the house, then they have bigger problems to worry about.

Ryuishi searches for something to take her mind off the stress. "Anybody gonna tell me how this little ragtag group got put together?" she settles on.

"You weren't at the Chuunin Exam finals," Gaara says, as if that explains everything. It really doesn't, and she might even be more lost than before.

"So he came over to the Oto delegation residence and I... may have told him... some things," Haku tacks on hesitantly, remembering her reaction the last time he revealed who she was. He peeks over to her face, and he realizes that her moods are shifting faster than before, like he's hit some sort of switch.

"They left you," she says slowly, "In the same lodgings I stayed in?"

"Yeah. We all stayed there," Naruto says casually as he goes to cut the vegetables.

Haku winces when he notices her nails dig furrows into her palms, and he knows there is something ever so slightly off about her. He's delighted she is here, but all is not well with his mother figure.

"They took precautions," Haku attempts to soothe, and she shoots him a smile that does little for his nerves, and she throws herself into the task at hand.

The fight outside rages on, and a few times he catches the sand siblings flicking things through the screens of the open window. He drifts over there a few times as well, because he believes everyone outside has reasons to feel the sharp bite of a needle. It's a bit hard, because they are quite the distance away, but Haku has the advantage of high ground and excellent aim.

After Sakura returns, Kankuro takes over the bathroom, and dinner is well on its way to being prepared. The smell fills up the house, and she gently points Temari in the direction of one of the free rooms. They don't have enough for everybody, but there is enough to share, and more futons as well. The girl tiredly looks to Gaara, who nods his assent, and she shrugs to go place their things inside the lodgings, returning with a pleased look on her face.

Everyone courteously ignores the elephant in the room as the meal is laid out. Nobody seems to force the issue of why they have come, or the intense bloodshed going on outside. A few times, Haku catches Ryuishi glancing that way as if she is tempted to venture out, but her skin turns ashy and waxen, her jaw grits, and a cold sweat overtakes her when she makes moves to do so.

It surprises him that he isn't the only one on the lookout for them, because each time it happens, Naruto seems to choose something to rattle on about, or Gaara gently takes her hand and leads her

away, and he's filled with warmth at the sight of it. They see it too, the distress inside of her, the slightly off-kilter bearing she has.

Their efforts don't stall her forever though, and there comes a moment after the meal when she looks at the door, and her bearing seems to settle. Her gaze is determined despite her shaking hands and obvious anxiety.

"I think that you should all get some rest," she says calmly, and Haku doesn't miss the commanding tone in the suggestion.

Naruto immediately begins to protest. "But-!"

"-Nope," Ryuishi cuts him off. "But nothing, rest time for everyone under jounin rank."

"I do not feel comfortable allowing you to go unsupervised," Gaara grumbles, voicing what they all feel. Surprisingly, she snorts.

"At this point, I don't blame you," she scoffs, and then grows serious. "But that doesn't change the fact I'm going out there, and you are staying inside."

"But-" Sakura tries, and this time she seems to snap, like a switch being flipped. Haku feels the burst of chakra like a warning, and he is even more unsettled by it. Never has she flared it out in such an obvious warning manner before.

"Listen up, because I'm only gonna say this once. You deserve some answers, and there are things that need to be explained, but right now you need rest, and I have to deal with something that has been thirteen years in the making. It involves me, my unit, and the jounin team from Konoha that took me in. It does not include children, no matter how dear to me you are," she bites out, and there is the sound of rushing water from outside. The sunshine streaming through the window catches motes of dust, and she lifts her hand into the column of light, staring at the hand is illuminated by it.

"... We'll watch from the windows," Haku says quietly, and she nods, passing by him on her way towards the door. She places her hands gently on his shoulder for the slightest of seconds before she opens it up, and disappears outside.

Across from him Gaara glares, but Haku sends him a pointed look. "It's a beach," he reminds the other boy. "It's made of sand."

The hard stare ends, and Gaara relaxes a bit. Haku is right, it's all sand, and if anything even *looks* like it's going wrong, then he doesn't actually need to leave the house to protect her.

"Good call," Naruto comments, idly putting little braids into Sasuke's hair. The prone Uchiha is already drifting, fed by the helpful chopsticks of his teammates, and his weariness seeps into his bones. He's tied up, warm, and full. It only makes sense that he's sleepy as well.

"Are we allowed to throw stuff at her as well?" Kankuro asks curiously.

Temari punches him in the arm so hard he yelps, and that seems to suffice as his answer.

Zabuza doesn't think when he attacks Kisame.

One moment, he's chasing after Haku and his renegade gang, quietly impressed with the amount of skilled ninja he's put together in such a short amount of time. There are orange clad brats everywhere, some hinged to look like other children, others their plain and distracting selves. They are loud and aggravating, taking an increasing amount of time and effort to dodge, but ultimately, they aren't even threats.

The walls of living sand are a bit more dicey, but only by a little. They appear out of nowhere and grab onto limbs, and they don't hesitate to attempt serious harm. It's almost impressive until the jounin figure

out that there is a limited range to the technique, and that the sphere of sand that dodges between roots is acting as some sort of eye for whoever is casting the jutsu.

The trio is gaining ground, and it becomes all about pursuit until he registers that the swamp has ended, and the ocean greets him.

For a second he is soothed, because this is home, this is a safe place. The waves crash against the shore, the house is as inviting as ever, and all of the brats are enraptured by something in the sand. Then he registers a particular shade of blue, and notes the figure standing by themselves watching that gang of brats, and he's never been so angry in his life.

Zabuza can hear ringing in his ears, and he doesn't even register that he is surging forward to clash with the bastard until their swords meet. The impact throws sand up around them, but he doesn't look away, doesn't hesitate, not for a single second. He stares into the face of the man who used to be his commander, and he *hates* .

Kisame was his captain, his leader, and his brother in arms. They were part of the Seven Swordsmen together, they lived through the kiri purges together, and they had gone to war. Again and again, Kisame had his back, led him when he lost his way and didn't understand.

The man in front of him is a stranger who doesn't deserve a name. He's the callous bastard who disappeared at random, leaving Zabuza to be the last of the Kaijuu inside of Kiri. He is the degenerate fool who joined an organization that put Haku in danger, and almost cost Ryuishi her life. He is the traitor who stole that same woman in the dead of night when he could have come back at any time. He's the coward who held her hostage and put her through hell.

Now he stands here, on their property, near the home they settled into, as if he isn't a threat who betrayed his own unit, and Zabuza is *livid* .

Zabuza once said that he would make Kisame match every drop of blood she spilt and every bruise she wore. He takes it back though, because just killing him sounds so much better.

"Wait-" the bastard begins to say, but Zabuza doesn't wait. He engages immediately without remorse, swinging his fist around to meet the other man's face. Kisame blocks, because he has always been good, but Zabuza has gotten better as well. Good enough to claim what is his, and to defend it as well.

The next time he lunges, he shoulder checks his opponent, and no more words are spoken from him. He is not a Konoha-nin. They are from Kiri, and what they know is violence and blood.

So that is what they exchange.

At first, it seems to be going well. He drives the intruder back with a series of short, quick sword strokes, unrelenting in their pace, and the Konoha jounin come as a handy, if briefly forgotten, surprise. They appear to his side, herding the larger man towards the water, pushing him farther and farther back until they are stepping onto the water itself.

It doesn't take Kisame long to retaliate, though, and he leaps far enough away to buy himself a few short seconds. He flashes through a series of handsigns and slams his palms on the water, and it churns beneath his hands. Sharp fins cut through the brine for a moment before disappearing into the water, and the stakes are raised.

It becomes a bit blurry after that.

Zabuza remembers swords meeting again and again, clashing like the constant pounding of war drums. He remembers strength of the blows jolting his hands and running up his arms, recalls the way Samehada squealed when he managed to cut it at just the right angle, and how Kubikiribōchō broke clean through after the living blade bit it with chakra-enhanced teeth. There was the crackling of

lightning, chirping like a thousand birds, accompanied by the sound of groaning wood as the swamp came alive to defend those that lived inside for so long.

At some point, there came another opponent with raven black hair and burning crimson eyes, undoubtedly the infamous Uchiha Itachi. His mouth kept moving, but for the life of him, Zabuza couldn't hear a word. It was only him and Kisame trading blow after blow, a frenzy of strikes and attacks.

Zabuza does remember the curl of satisfaction in his gut that he felt when he re-grew Kubikiribōchō, using the blood running from a wound he made in Kisame's side. He recollects the hot wash of fresh fury that ran through him when the other swordsman managed to shatter the bones of his hand with a well placed kick, and the drain on his chakra when Samehada shaved along his thigh.

But when he looks back, what he remembers most is his rage, his absolute and unending anger at his commander for waiting so long and for hurting the very people he was meant to protect. When everything else was wrong, when the world didn't make sense and they had nobody else, the unit was supposed to stick together. They knew each other, grew up together. During the war, they fought the same battles and saw the same horrors, and while he couldn't understand Ryuishi sometimes, he could always get Kisame.

Then he left, and unlike Zabuza, he never had the good sense to go back to his unit. He spent his years with strangers in strange places, and he only returned to break them.

So Zabuza will kill him, and then *he can never harm them again* .

A tree root twists into life to his left, and it spears through the cloud of crows that block out the sunlight with their inky wings. He hears water rushing below him as he dodges another mammoth shark from below, dancing out of the way of sharp teeth and powerful jaws. Kunai sail over his head from behind, only to be blocked by a storm of shuriken thrown in perfect opposition.

In the middle of it all, Kisame stands with his sword, bleeding from his side with a split lip and bruised eye. It's bad, but it's nothing that Zabuza doesn't mirror in some way with his own broken hand and bleeding nose. In sync, they raise their blades, and Zabuza knows in his bones that this will be a decisive hit. Not an ending blow perhaps, but it will decide which swordsman this fight favors, regardless of allies and covering fire.

He grows tunnel vision, focused completely on the way his opponent twists his wrists and angles his hips, trying to decide in a split second which way the blade will go. They step together, their chests rising in concert.

The water beneath their feet *heaves* .

Immediately the tunnel vision seems to fade away as they both stumble to catch their footing, the sea having grown a mind of its own. It roils beneath him unnaturally, out of sync with the tide and waves, pitching this way and that, creating walls of water and a surface that seems impossible to stick to. The Konoha ninja scramble up the roots of mangrove trees, crawling to the unnatural heights they feel so safe in. He turns just in time to catch a saltwater splash to the face from a rogue column of liquid.

"Ryuishi!" Hatake shouts, and it's the first word that Zabuza has registered in a while. It echoes in his ears alongside the wet slap of bare, chakra coated feet.

He opens his stinging eyes, and the bubbling, burning rage seems to calm to a simmer, because *she's here* . She looks nervous, frightened as she releases the technique she used, but there are no bruises on her body, no missing limbs or added scars that he can see.

She's safe, safe and alive. Her long hair is twisted in her trademark bun, and her face is serene. But the calmness is forced, and her skin looks sallow and waxen. She's defensive and afraid, and his first instinct is to pick her up and never let go.

"Hey," she calls out nervously, padding her way over to the battlefield, her dark eyes darting between the figures on it. "Got room in this free-for-all for one more?"

He can hear the muffled groan that comes from his commander's chest, and the noise makes him pause. It's the same exasperated, strangled grumble that he always made when Ryuishi or Zabuza did something he didn't approve of.

"What," Tenzō says flatly from somewhere up and to the right.

At the same moment, the Uchiha says, "That is... inadvisable."

She shrugs, but the action seems forced. Her posture is tense and flighty, and she keeps dipping her toes into the water as if she is contemplating submerging herself at any second.

"Well, you know, big ol' crazy fight with people shouting and S-rank jutsu. Can't resist that," she jokes, laughing near the end. It's not as smooth as her regular laughs, or as perfect as her fake ones. Everything about her seems just a little bit unpolished, not quite the same.

She doesn't stop though, moving forward until she stands between him and Kisame. She flicks her eyes over to him for just a moment, and something seems to relax. Her jaw unclenches, and the smile she sends him is relieved. Zabuza feels the same.

"So," she continues, turning her head upwards to address the Konoha ninja as well. "We could all keep fighting, and I will definitely join in. Or-get this-you could all take this chance to have a home cooked meal on a fabulous beach that literally has only ever been known by four people before three months ago. Then, we can repress all of said time in our heads and never mention it again."

There is a beat of silence, and she seems to grow hesitant, her eyes trying to keep track of them all at once. He can see the way she

slides her foot back to gain a better stance, and how she almost hums with anxious energy.

"You were kidnapped and tortured," Hatake says incredulously. "You were held for months while your fail-safes were triggered one by one. Nobody is certain how many have gone off, there is a possibility of chaos, and your kidnappers are right here in front of us."

She laughs, and it sounds just a tad bit hysterical. Her eyes are too wide, and when Zabuza steps closer, he notices she's shaking. "There's also two jinchuuriki inside my house, every single one of the Kazekage's children, and the last two Uchiha who can claim direct lineage of the clan head on my property-one of which who is wanted for murder of said clan, the other who is tied up on my floor. The Yondaime Hokage's legacy and heir to Uzushio is chatting with my wonderful Yuki son, who may be a mastermind, and also *you all left them with Orochimaru.* "

"Bad call," Kisame comments, and Itachi nods his head silently in agreement.

"Shut up, you, or a lifetime of consequence-free nut punches will be the *least* terrible punishment for you that I think of," she hisses, and Zabuza winces along with every male in hearing range.

Kisame sputters, because he certainly never agreed to such a thing. Admittedly, it's technically better than he could have ever hoped, but also worse in a way.

"Also," Ryuishi says, snapping back to her frantic self. " A/so, the Sannin are back together, I'm not sure if I pissed off a plant zombie man, there is a third and hitherto unmentioned Uchiha who I kinda maybe brain melded with, I'm not completely back on my medication, there is a man with the fucking Rinnegan, and I'm pretty sure the price of some of my hoarded stocks have dropped, and apparently it's been months since I was captured," she finishes, wracking her head for more problems. She goes to open her mouth and maybe continue on for an hour or twenty, but a warm, callused hand clasps

over her mouth while a furnace burns at her back. The smell of weapons oil fills her nose, and she totally doesn't get dewy eyed or anything. Totally.

"Dinner," Zabuza says finally. "Then the rest."

"Never eaten dinner on a beach before," Tenzō comments lightly.

Itachi hums. "The sand gets in everything."

"Dinner," Kakashi says in the dull sort of manner that one gets when they have spent far too long in the company of Ryuishi, and the chaos she brings.

"Dinner," Kisame agrees, and he is beginning to remember exactly how weird things got when she was involved.

AN: So. Reunion, not quite over. Couldn't fit it all in one chapter. I think that it's kinda important to notice the budding character interactions and incident drops. Namely, Ryuishi mentioning her incident with Tobito, and how scared she is, alongside how the older sand-sibs distancing themselves and being polite, but not genial. Also, all of the tension and hate/blame/fuckyou going around.

Shout-out to my lurkers, my favoriters and followers. Heaps of joy onto my reviewers, who give me strength when I'm kinda not so strong.

Also, Enbi. Enbi, who is the bomb, and made this word-mess into readable font. #Bless

Question: Can you see the hints, or am I being too vague?

In Which Pieces Come Together

I do not own Naruto.

Eating a meal cooked by a woman who has taken both the time and effort to prepare a space for you to sit is something to be appreciated. Eating said meal on a beach while the sun sets and the waves crash against the shore might even be said to be romantic, especially if said woman takes the time to pull you aside and embrace you. It might be doubly emotional if she holds that hug for a very long moment, and buries her face in your chest, regardless of how awful you must smell after a long mission and an arduous battle.

Kakashi isn't really feeling the mood.

Sure, he's more than a little relieved to see her, and when she throws her arms around him, he might return the favor. After all, she's been gone for a long time, and her state of being was in constant question. The smell that permeates her skin, and the very air around her home might make something inside of him unwind and relax for the first time in what feels like forever. He may run his fingers over her back just to make sure she's real and that this is actually happening, to soothe the nervous trembling he can feel shaking her frame.

However, the fact remains: he is in the presence of several very powerful, very skilled unknowns, and everyone is in a form of danger.

Instead of complete relief and joy, he feels paranoia and caution. He wants to reform the group and bodily haul her into the very comfortable looking house off to his right. He then wants Tenzo to barricade the house while he seals it, and he wants Zabuzza to ensure that she doesn't suddenly disappear again.

He looks up from where he has been staring-the plate filled with food settled on a blanket in the sand-and he feels the weight of all the eyes on him. He knows for a fact that the blue giant with the sword didn't stare this hard when she embraced Zabuza, and nobody seemed perturbed at all when she first approached him.

His fingers tighten on her shoulder minutely, and the the swordsman frowns. Itachi stares unblinkingly onwards, and he can feel the questions running through their minds.

She shifts, pulling away, and he relents. Feeling her move out of his grasp makes him panic for a moment, but he quashes those feelings down and covers them up with the relief he feels at the fact that she is alive. He smoothes his features into carefully displayed apathy as she moves toward Tenzō and embraces him as well, whispering something in his ear. It only soothes him a little that his kōhai receives the same guarded glares.

Ryuishi herself seems content to ignore the rising tensions as she maneuvers between all, dishing out meals and serving more food than anybody knows what to do with. Periodically though, she will pause, her knuckles turning white on the serving platter, or her eyes sliding over to the ocean longingly. But despite her fidgeting and unease, she buckles down and continues serving the food.

Zabuza doesn't hesitate for a moment when he is presented with a plate, unwinding his mask and digging into the meal as if it is his first one in months. Awkwardly enough, Itachi seems to follow his example, albeit in a much more controlled manner, primly picking up bite-sized pieces with his chopsticks and mechanically lifting them to his mouth. Even Tenzō picks at his food hesitantly once it becomes available to him.

Kakashi, however, won't fall for the distraction. He's too tense to eat, caught up in the staring contest between himself and the man who has the gall to sit so quietly after doing what he did.

There is silence as they settle down with their food, tending to their wounds on little seats in the sand. In the center of them all, a fire crackles merrily, burning away at a slab of driftwood, and he snaps his dislocated finger back into place without a sound. He can bandage the stab wound on his back later.

"So," Ryuishi says, starting with what could possibly be the most forced cheer he has ever heard from her. She smiles, but it's too wide by far, and she looks ready to run despite the fact that she is sitting down. "Anybody want to tell me how long it's been since I got spirited away?"

He goes to open his mouth and tell her-three months, ten days, and sixteen hours-but he's cut off before he can start by the monotonous voice of Uchiha Itachi.

"Do *not* give her that information. It's likely to set off a panic attack or lesser episode that will restrict her for some while."

Beside him, he feels Tenzō's mood drop alongside his own, because they weren't aware that she had panic attacks or episodes. Yes, he had experienced some of her more vivid flashbacks and night terrors, and he knew that she had problems with hallucinations without medication, but anxiety?

Her face colors, and he feels like gaping. She's so much more expressive, and he is unsure of how comfortable he is with that. The woman he has worked with for years can control her body language at will and have it telegraph whatever she pleases, with few slipups. She doesn't genuinely flush like a schoolgirl.

Then he's angry, because she looks so uncomfortable in a place that is her own home. She's nervous and scared, embarrassed and ashamed. He's livid, because she's been put through hell and *she doesn't deserve this*.

"I wonder whose fault that is," he says quietly, his unwavering gaze on the swordsman across from him. The taller man seems to harden

at the accusation, his figure stilling completely, his features unmoving and fierce.

"I know what I did," he admits, and then his eyes narrow. "But I don't know why it matters to you."

There is a tense bit of silence, and Kakashi is reminded of clashes between rival packs. The quiet before a growl and the stillness before a flash of white teeth.

Ryuishi laughs, and once again, it seems forced. "That's right. Introductions," she manages to get out. "Kisame, this is Hatake Kakashi and Tenzō from Konoha. Originally, I started a correspondence with Kakashi under the guise of selling information, and he tried to recruit me for his village. I actually first met Itachi when he was just a little bratling in Kakashi's ANBU squad."

"Oh?" Kisame says absently, continuing to stare. The fire casts flickering shadows over his strangely colored skin, and his eyes reflect ominously in the twilight.

"Indeed," the Uchiha agrees. "Many years later, it was she who asked me to care for you in return for a great kindness she did for me when I defected, though I feel I would have done so regardless."

This does make the blue man whirl on him, the same way it makes Kakashi swivel around to stare at Ryuishi. She seems to physically shrink under his gaze, curling in on herself while simultaneously staring spitefully back.

Kisame looks betrayed. " *What?* You mean you were-"

"-my own free agent, acting under nobody's will but my own, who chose to seek out a person that a figure I respected seemed to care deeply about even after years of separation?" Itachi finishes calmly, slowly bringing another bite towards his mouth. "Who, after meeting said person, saw qualities that I also enjoyed and found worthy of establishing bonds with?"

Kisame begins to mouth that silently, running the words through his head. It takes him a few times to get the message, and when he does, he feels oddly touched at the sentiment. He knew he liked the boy, found his dedication and calm admirable, and his strength of character impressive, but to know that Itachi also found positive qualities in him is heartwarming.

Funnily enough, Ryuishi seems to be staring at the young Uchiha as well, something akin to mounting horror overtaking her face. Her ideas are far less sentimentally driven. "A 'figure you greatly respect' my ass," she sputters. "Oh my sweet Koalemos, please tell me you are lying."

The Uchiha sends her a look that is both impassive and utterly unimpressed. She is appalled and wistful at the same time, because on one hand, that's really nice, but on the other, she is an awful person. She looks like she's about to call his intellect into question once more when she's interrupted.

"What great kindness are you talking about?" Tenzō asks pointedly, snapping her away from a tangent. Her teeth literally click together when she closes her mouth, and she eyes Itachi in a way that orders him not to answer that.

"I purpose... a game, of sorts," Itachi says calmly, ignoring the look completely. "We all have secrets we have gathered, and only Ryuishi-san seems to know them all. I suggest we go around and tell them and try to figure out what it is she has been hiding for so long."

The flames crackle merrily on as the group contemplate the consequences of such an activity. In a way, it is a bit of a trade. In order to gain information, they must give it up.

"That sounds like a terrible fucking idea," Ryuishi bursts out vehemently, switching from sullenly determined to waspishly defensive in a heartbeat. Her hands ball into fists by her side, as if she is angry that such a thing was even suggested at all.

Zabuza, however, seems to think it sounds like a fair plan. "She started founding her network before she entered the Academy when she was seven," he begins, starting general. It's something that's bothered him for a while in the story of the Rakki Ryuu. She found the kids and then was recruited by Fuguki, and she entered the academy young as it was.

Zabuza remembers how small she was, underfed and too keen by far. He remembers things he never used to question, but lately have bothered him a great deal.

"You're a slut," she snaps Zabuza, who seems completely unaffected. If anything, he just shrugs, accepting her words.

Itachi nods along with this information, seemingly pleased with the broadness of the statement, or perhaps the time of it. It only makes sense to start at the beginning if they are attempting to discover how they ended up where they are now.

"So a child prodigy then, displaying leadership qualities before she was recruited," the Uchiha decides.

"No," Kisame interrupts. "I was the one who tested her. She was scrappy, but no genius. She did know me before we met, though, and back then I wasn't as infamous as I am now."

Ryuishi scowls, and she bares her teeth at the two swordsmen. For two people who were intent on maiming each other less than an hour ago, they are certainly acting in perfect harmony to quickly climb their way up her shit list.

Itachi hums contemplatively. "A pattern emerges," he says slowly. "She knew me before I knew her as well, and she also approached me when I was young. Tell me, is there anyone who she didn't approach before the age of eighteen, perhaps with knowledge she could, or should, have not known about the individual?"

Silence is his answer, because it is a set pattern. Kakashi remembers that from the start she seemed to know him, even as a masked ANBU, and more alarmingly she knew Tenzō as well from his use of the Mokuton. In fact, there are few people she didn't reach before maturity, and he can only think of one that became a heavy influence on her.

"Orochimaru. She didn't know Orochimaru when he was a child or teenager," he mentions. It's not much of a secret, but it is an anomaly. In many ways, the Otokage is the exception, set apart from the general rules she follows, as if they have worked out something entirely different between them.

"She still knew about him. She admitted that she met him when we went on our first mission as a unit. She couldn't have been more than eight," Zabuza points out, becoming interested in the pieces that are clicking together. He pushes some of the food on his plate around, trying to fit them into shapes that make sense. Usually he wouldn't even bother, but her secrets and behaviors have caused too much chaos and disruption, not only to the world at large, but herself. The weight of them is crushing her, and he'll be damned before he sees her destroyed by her own stupidity.

"The kunai from the angry mob," Kisame recalls, growing even more aggravated at the serpentine bastard. His very first action was to injure her. Admittedly, Kisame is not doing too great in that area right now, but it's *Orochimaru*. That man has skinned people alive just to sate his own curiosity of how their bloodlines work.

"You should quit," Ryuishi says lowly. She was uncomfortable before, but now it's getting out of hand. Her heart beats rapidly in her chest, and she feels a bit like a rabbit in the face of a hawk.

"Seven? Angry mob?" Tenzo repeats out loud, wondering exactly what kind of missions Kiri used to send their units out on. He can't even imagine attempting to confront Orochimaru as an adult, let alone as little more than a child. How long has she been playing these games?

"She was never loyal to the state, then. Unsurprising, considering her already advanced knowledge. She may have not been a prodigy in the shinobi sense, but as a tactician and intelligence agent, she obviously surpassed her age by far," Itachi states. Ryuishi grits her teeth and goes to punch him in the arm, but he catches her fist and holds it while she squirms, even though the force behind the blow sends pins and needles through his palm.

"She admitted to losing her ability to think rationally due to trauma. Having amassed forces in the shadows before the war, when she came back from battle to find her mother crushed in the remnants of her home, she turned against the state and organized a rebellion, followed by a mass exodus of the population from Water Country, including Clan Shinobi and civilians," Kakashi continues, following the timeline. It reveals interesting truths, and unconsidered prospects.

The Uchiha seems to pin her with a stare then, and she meets it unflinchingly for a minute. She cannot hold it forever though, and her eyes drifting towards the surf as she dreams of escaping into the ocean. She never told him everything, never told anyone but Orochimaru everything, and even then, she edited what she said a lot. It was supposed to keep her safe, keep them all safe.

"She planned it from the start," Itachi realizes. "She planned a rebellion before she was recruited, but managed to keep it flexible enough to fit in with changes that would occur over the years. She met Orochimaru and seized it as an opportunity to establish ties outside of her home, convinced children and teenagers of her qualities as a teacher and leader, ensuring their loyalty as adults, she provided means of production to amass money for weaponry, and when the time was ripe, she prompted action."

"She was six when she was recruited," Kisame sees fit to remind the group.

Itachi's brows rise, but aside from that he is as stone-faced as ever. "Was she?"

Ryuishi feels like vomiting. She tries to pull her fist back, to run away from all of the eyes she can feel boring into her. Her breathing comes quick and shallow, and the world spins.

Itachi talks in that quiet, still way of his. "I wonder what kind of child could foresee so much. What sort of teenager could manipulate so adeptly that even the fellow geniuses of her generation-the renowned Sharingan Kakashi and the remaining Kiri no Kaijuu-were left wondering? What sort of adult could know what was meant to happen months and years before it was meant to occur? How is it that you knew about the Uchiha massacre long before it was even brought up? So long, in fact, that you were able to warn me of it's coming, and offer me a way out?"

The group seems to hold it's breath, and Ryuishi panics. Itachi is too smart, too good, and she should have never brought him in. Sure he saved her ass and also probably Kisame's, but he's a motherfucking genius in the realest sense of the term. He's been studying her, and dammit, she should have seen it coming.

"I didn't," she lies desperately, the words choking her. "You're making shit up."

He doesn't answer, and she sees the fire reflected in his coal eyes, his pale skin cast in the orange glow of the flames. He is the most fearsome creation of the leaf, the fire that consumes steadily and advances without pause.

"The Noble Clans," Zabuza says, staring at the image of fear on her face. "You managed to get them out before the purges. But nobody knew they were coming."

"You managed to secure a place outside of Kiri to act as a haven, choosing exactly the right candidate to assist you in overcoming your cognitive disability before he defected or anybody discovered his scheming," Kakashi says, considering for once that perhaps Orochimaru did not use her, *but she used Orochimaru* .

"You knew who I was freshly out of Root, even though Orochimaru remained ignorant for years," Tenzō says, wondering how she never seemed surprised that the Shodaime's technique lived on through him. In fact, though he has repressed most of that encounter for his own health, he distinctly remembers her calling out something about him specifically.

Finally, and perhaps most damningly, Kisame adds his observations. They feel like concrete shoes on her feet, pulling her down, down, down...

"When you were mad, back at the base, you called the masked man Obito, even though he had been calling himself Madara since I met him," he says, and she hears Kakashi suck in a breath, acting as if she slapped him in the face. Itachi's expression morphs as well, fading briefly into confusion, then recognition, finally settling on bland acceptance.

"So, Madara remains dead, and in his place, my cousin is alive," Itachi states thoughtfully, taking in her expression. "That makes eight living Uchiha, more than enough to still call a clan, if smaller than before."

"You idiot," she hisses, and the group seems to register what has been said all at once. Tenzō makes a strange squawking noise, and Kakashi repeats the word alive once more under his breath. Kisame lets out a strangled wheeze as she tears her hand away from Itachi at last, and Zabuza is already getting up again, ready to run after her should she flee.

Tenzō leans in towards her. "There are more Uchiha?"

She flinches back, dead certain that he is going to get up and make her talk. Anger and fear explodes inside her head, and she can't keep it together. "Shut up! Everybody shut up!" she barks, trying to reign in the situation. If she just switches attention away, she can come up with a lie, that she swapped out the kids and everybody is still dead-

"The Rakki Ryuu helped me smuggle five infants into the Land of Iron after the massacre, establishing homes and ties away from Shinobi life. Even she herself cannot bring them back, but they live on," Itachi says, and his words feel like a solid blow to her stomach. She's been repressing that for years, carefully stowing it away, trying to forget it ever happened. She had been dead silent on the topic of the Uchiha clan, quieter than the fucking grave, and then he just goes out and reveals everything.

"Was it Obito? Was it really him, or are you lying?" Kakashi says, and she cannot stand the desperation in his eyes, the hunger and hope. It makes her feel sick, dirty, and unclean.

"Kakashi..." She trails off, no words able to come out, because it's never going to be the same. How can she reveal that he is the very person who killed his sensei, that he saw everything that had happened between Kakashi and Rin?

How can she admit that she wasn't good enough to stop it all from happening?

"How is it that a kunoichi from Mist with no documented siblings or younger associates at all becomes so good with children," Itachi continues to ponder out loud. "Where did you learn to cradle a newborn so tenderly, it's head braced just right? Why did you tell me that no matter what happens, you never forget family?"

Ryuishi feels like she can't breathe, and she shoots up from her seat, stumbling backwards in the sand. Zabuza approaches steadily onward, reassuring and safe, but she's trapped. All of the pieces she spent so long painstakingly crafting, the relationships she made and people she cares about, they are coming together and figuring it out. She wants to shove them away, to wrap herself up inside her walls and boxes and keep them out. It's only safe if she's in control, and she's absolutely not.

"Those people you showed me," Kisame murmurs, staring at his hands. "Did you really have a family before Kiri? It seems

impossible, but so much already does."

"Don't talk about them," Ryuishi says pleadingly, borderline hysterically. "You can't, they're gone, *I can't get them* -"

Zabuza makes a soothing, shushing noise beneath his mask, his weight shifted at just the right angle to lunge, and Ryuishi feels her dinner climbing back up the inside her throat. She's tempted to just hurl all over everybody in the circle, but the gorge gets stuck behind the knot of panic that lodges itself in her esophagus. It becomes a tangled mix of breathlessness and nausea.

Her vision starts to go grey around the edges, and her head is swimming. Dizziness overwhelms her, and she stumbles back drunkenly, shaking like a leaf. Her body keeps telling her to put her fists near her cheeks, to assume a taijutsu stance so she can defend herself, and her heart is beating so fast in her chest it hurts. There's a stitch in her side that she can't seem to get rid of, and no matter how much air she sucks in, it isn't enough.

(Almost unnoticed, there is also a foreign sense of cruel satisfaction, camaraderie, and then alarm. It feels like a punch to the back of her skull. She's overwhelmed by panic though, and doesn't question it once it has the good grace to disappear.)

Her feet trip over a piece of wood in the sand that she could have sworn wasn't there a second ago, and she falters just as Zabuza lunges. She manages to swipe at his shoulder weakly before she's digging her nails into the skin of his chest, unsure if she's attempting to hold on for safety or maim him.

"Stop," she croaks, her voice breaking. "Stop, *please* ."

"You can't carry everything," Zabuza says, patting her head as she shivers. She can hear his heart beating steadily through his ribcage, and she loses herself in the sound of it.

"I can," she says, breathless from breathing too fast. "I can do it. It's okay."

"It's not okay," someone-anyone-says quietly.

For a long moment, there is silence, nothing but the sound of driftwood cracking and popping under tongues of flame, her own shallow panting, and Zabuza's steady pulse. She loses track of her surroundings as he brings her down, combing his fingers through her hair and holding her firmly as he seats himself back on the ground, working her silently through her panic attack. His breathing is even, in and out, and she unconsciously sets out to match it, clawing at him. The smell of iron is comforting, as familiar as the feel of water against her skin, or the sharp breath of air after she comes up from a dive.

When her fingers loosen their grip, and droplets of blood well up over the half-crescent cuts on his skin, she feels a vague sense of guilt, but more than that, she feels exhausted. Her eyelids droop, and she can't describe how how nice it feels to have somebody there who knows how to halt an episode in its tracks.

"Almost done," Zabuza tells her. She knows that it's nowhere near almost done, knows that there is a whole slew of shit that needs to be addressed, but she's tired. She's sleepy and warm, her life is a TV drama with far too many episodes, and she kind of just wants to sail away into the sea.

"I'm tired," she mumbles, because she's tried so hard and all she's managed to do is find new and entirely ridiculous ways to fuck everything up.

"Tell us," Zabuza says, unusually careful and coaxing, "and then you can rest."

She huffs out a breath. Itachi may have trapped her, but Zabuza is the stubborn asshole who knows she is too lazy to keep fighting forever.

"I'm not five, you bastard," she accuses without heat, and he jostles her gently with his arm, prompting her to turn and address those waiting for an answer. She peels herself out of his grasp quietly, turning around to face the group.

It's unnerving and embarrassing to face everybody, and she's half tempted to just walk away, but nobody will let her sleep if she doesn't get this over with. She hopes everybody is happy, because she's exhausted, and after this, she's going to demand to be carried to her room instead of moving there with her own two feet, children and chores be damned.

She takes a deep, steadying breath. It fills her lungs and grounds her enough that she can finally, maybe meet Kakashi's eyes. He deserves to be told regardless of the consequences, because she ruined so much for her unit. She shattered borders and fucked up entire countries, and the mess the Kaijuu no Kiri made kind of got out of hand. The least she can do is tell him, because Kakashi was there for her when she had nothing. He held her and he tried, and he is a good man.

"Obito Uchiha isn't dead," she admits. "As far as I know, which is just hearsay because I have no evidence to back it up, half of his body was crushed in the cave in, but he was rescued by the original Madara Uchiha, who survived only because he was found useful by a being known as Zetsu."

"He's alive," Kakashi breathes, and she aches for him. The current Obito isn't the Obito he knew, and if she had a chance, she would tear the orange masked bastard a new one. She understand the wanting, the yearning, but Obito has made her pay something she did not owe. He has a debt to her now, and she intends that he pay it in blood.

"He was used," she corrects, level-headed enough to be at least somewhat objective. "Madara knew his time was coming, and he staged Nohara Rin's death using Kirigakure forces in order to awaken Obito's Mangekyō and persuade him to carry out Madara's

will after he passed away. It worked, and your old teammate became a shade of who he was in order to fulfill Madara's dream, which was actually Zetsu's goal."

"What is Zetsu?" Tenzō asks while Kakashi absorbs the fact that he was also used and manipulated by a geriatric geezer with pinkeye.

Her face twists as she attempts to figure out a good way to describe the being. Zetsu is, and remains, at the top of her shit list. She's not exactly one hundred percent sure of her memories in that hell hole, but she remembers Zetsu. He felt... strange to her. Instinctively, he was something familiar, like she should remember, but couldn't, and that bothers her.

"It's a cactus... person... thing," Kisame describes in her place, and the trio remembers their run-in with something fitting that description. "It acted as a spy in the Akatsuki, but looking back, it may have been the mastermind."

"What was the actual goal of the Akatsuki?" Itachi asks. "We were told it was to gather and extract the Bijuu to create the most powerful weapon, but I doubt it is so, especially considering it was the false Madara who told us."

"Obito said *what* now?" Kakashi says, and his hand rises up to feel his eye. He's overwhelmed that the courageous, idealistic boy he knew is still alive, and almost uncomprehending that he seems to have changed drastically. It's a lot of information to absorb at once, considering everything. Years ago, he met a missing ninja, and he thought she was a bad spy. Since then, he has thought her a master manipulator, a lady, a helpless victim of chance, and somehow it has morphed into... he doesn't know. He honestly has no idea.

"Zetsu needs the Bijuu, an Uchiha, and a Rinnegan user. The Uchiha can control Bijuu with their stupid eyes, the Rinnegan is flat out a doujutsu powerup, and Zetsu wants all nine Bijuu so he can bring back the Juubi and Kaguya," Ryuishi explains, feeling her energy drain even further. In a way it's relieving to get this off her chest,

however, it also feels like giving up. This last encounter has taken the wind out of her sails, and all she wants to do is sleep. Sleep, and then run forever.

Itachi hums in understanding, slotting everything together at a rapid pace inside his head. Like some sort of beautiful machine, he flips mindsets and winds the pieces of her plans together from what little he has to go on.

"And that's why you endeared yourself to jinchuuriki, specifically the container of the One-Tails and Nine-Tails, the first and last we were to gather. You also ensured that they had strong ties with their village and teams in order to increase the difficulty of obtaining them," he deducts, and she rubs her eyes, too tired to deal with how ridiculously fucking smart Itachi is. Eventually she just leaves her hands there, covering her eyes, holding the weight of her head.

"How long have you known?" Kisame asks, and she cringes into her own hands, wanting to not answer.

"Forever," she finally breathes, feeling utterly defeated.

There is a beat of silence while everyone contemplate the nature of the truth she just announced, and measure the weight of what they know against the unrealistic and fantastic nature of the claim. Surely, nobody could ever know the future, however, how did she know so much? Is it madness speaking, and if so, why does it explain so much?

"In a way," Kakashi says slowly, not sure what it is he's supposed to say. "I feel unique. You knew my story and still ended up choosing me."

"The chosen ones," Zabuza agrees solemnly, and Ryuishi groans, sinking into a ball. She's done. That's it. It's over now, and she's going to bed. Tomorrow, she's going to start building a boat, everybody else be damned. Like Columbus, she'll sail the ocean

blue, but hopefully with a lot less genocide and general subjugation. Looking at her track record, though, it doesn't seem likely.

"If you are an actual kami, I'm not sure I'm alright with the choices the divine are making," Tenzō informs her, and she doesn't even want to answer. If he has a few questions for the divine, she has a whole library full of them. She's going to start with ' *So rebirth, fluke or not?* ' and end with ' *Why can't I pee standing up?* '.

"I'm human," she insists, falling backwards into the sand. "Just an ordinary, everyday human female."

Kisame snorts disbelievingly, and he leans forward on his knees, looking miraculously at ease considering the situation. He takes his first bite of the night, letting out a pleased hum in his appreciation, though he is unsure if it is for the meal, or how the conversation has relieved some of the tension. It's astounding how deducing truths from a liar they have all come to know is actually a bonding experience for everybody. Although he is uncertain how to feel about the events of today and the truths revealed this night, he is a bit more hopeful than he was when it all began.

The woman he kidnapped is not the girl he knew, and Hidan may have actually had a clue. Zabuza can apparently empathize, which is new, and his partner was actually his assigned caretaker. The Mokuton isn't extinct anymore, and Sharingan Kakashi apparently has a long and colorful history with her and the masked man.

He chews thoughtfully, and wonders if this is why she lies, because the truth is absolutely absurd. It's full of half-plant men that can separate and clone themselves, dead old guys from the founding era, chakra monsters, and foreknowledge.

Itachi continues to watch her, though he cannot bring himself to call attention to what is bothering him. The atmosphere has shifted so nicely, as planned, and everyone has been brought to a more harmonious state.

However, she purposefully avoided talking about her family any. The mere mention of it triggered something like a hysterical breakdown, and despite admitting that she had great amounts of foreknowledge, she hasn't revealed how she came by that information. Nor has she explained how she has changed things, or what they originally were changed from.

He watches her through half-lidded eyes as she hunkers down, rolling over and closing her eyes, and he tries to fit the details together.

She knew of them all before she met them, sorted them out specifically for reasons unknown. Each and every person that she has gathered, however, seems to have the common theme of a tragic past, or a narrowly avoided one. After all, he imagines that the jinchuuriki inside her house would have had a much lonelier childhood without her, and that Demon of the Mist would have grown far more isolated had she not intervened. Kisame chose his own path, even though it seems heavily influenced by her, and Hatake and Tenzō's life are much the same. She could only alter so much because she came from where she did, and most of her effort seemed to go into rehabilitation rather than prevention with them.

There is a tricky amount of maneuvering, and an undue amount of attachment to a large number of people, but ultimately, she seems mostly blind to events she caused herself. Larger ones, such as the Uchiha massacre and the Akatsuki's plans, she seemed prenatually ready to intervene with, but her own kidnapping and the loss of her medication came as great surprises to her.

Itachi remains silent, because he has no doubt there will be more trouble coming in the future. Zetsu remains at large, as does Obito, and perhaps even more frightening, the unknown entity she called Kaguya seems ever present and at large. There are mysteries that have yet to be unraveled, but for now, he must focus on other things.

He watches as his old ANBU team stares down the two swordsmen who hover over her prone form, and he huffs through his nose,

because he is sure whoever ends up having to cart her to her room will regret it once they notice the amount of sand that has accumulated in her hair. Itachi has other concerns, though. Things between the adults may have reached a tentative truce, but inside that house is the one person in the world he fears confronting the most. He never foresaw it coming about like this, but he will not run away. Sasuke deserves to know what happened that night, because if Itachi has learned anything from Ryuishi, it is that keeping secrets from the very people you wish to protect can wound them more than anything else in the world.

In a way he is glad, because the plans he made as a thirteen-year-old would have feasibly stood the test of time. Had he gone through with things as he wished, Sasuke would hate him, and in his distress, he could have done terrible things to his own brother.

But there had been no time, and he has grown. There are other paths to take than the one of hatred.

After all, The Rakki Ryuu chose the one of chaos, and she stands to face the future hand in hand with those she loves.

AN-Alright, so, a lot of foreshadowing here. It's got tons of dialouge, and I handled everything the best I could. Probs not perfect, but I tried. Let me know how you think it should have gone down.

A friendly hello and thank you to all my lurkers, favoriters, and followers. A hug and solid high five for all my reviewers, who point out my gaping plot holes and also keep me strong with their cheering.

My beta Enbi deserves better than what I give at times, and I cannot thank them enough for what they do. I'm honestly lost without them.

In Which there is Tension and a New Bond

I do not own Naruto.

Exhaustion, both physical and emotional, hits hard as she lies in the sand, and Ryuishi loses all coherence fairly fast. She's content enough to drift off on the beach, the sound of low murmurs mingling with the steady drum of the surf, lulling her her down.

It's a testament to her training that even as drained as she is, she remains peripherally aware, in a groggy, abstract way. It's enough to have her open her eyes when she feels somebody pick her up, register her relative safety, and close them again. She feels the gentle rhythm of the person's steps, is aware of the quiet whispered arguments and the change in humidity once they step inside her house.

She fades, and the next thing she becomes aware of is the feel of her sheets against her skin, and the press of cushions beneath her head. There is more quiet murmuring, grumbles exchanged in a series of voices she is too tired to identify right away, but her body tells her that it is alright, and that she can rest without fear for perhaps the first time in months.

Ryuishi lets herself go, and she sleeps without dreaming, dead to the world.

Outside of her room, Haku exchanges heated whispers with Zabuza over his choices while healing the cracked bones of his hand, casting hateful glares at Kisame who stares at him with the slightest bit of surprise.

He knew that Zabuza had taken on young Haku back in Kirigakure, someone he had assumed to be an errand boy of sorts. He did not know said errand boy was a member of the Yuki clan, or that he

would grow to use eerily similar facial expressions and surround himself with a carefully screened squad of overprotective brats.

Itachi had made off with one of them shortly after Ryuishi had been placed in her room. Presumably one of familial relation, considering their looks, and if one listened closely, they could hear the stifled shouting of a pubescent boy on the porch, interspersed with moments of silence and incredulation. The remaining Konoha-nin shared a look now and then, as if stumbling across interesting information, presumably through whatever methods they were using to listen in on said conversation.

If Kisame had any doubt in his mind that his teammates were in need of a guiding hand, he need only look before him. Nobody in their right mind assembles this many kids in one place without expecting property damage of some sort, and nobody should ever house two opposing forces, let alone three.

Haku continues to send glares at him, hissing something to Zabuzza, who looks faintly tired and disgruntled. The boy is obviously de-facto leader of this effort, and the rest take their cues from him, which means there are many short little things sending him their most loathing looks, huddling around the master bedroom's door as if he is going to suddenly go berserk and kidnap the woman inside. He would like to inform them that he doesn't often make the same mistake twice, but they don't look to be in a receptive mood.

Haku curses, stomps a single foot on the ground, and whirls to face him. For a moment, those furrowed brows and bared teeth are so eerily reminiscent of Ryuishi that Kisame's brain just stops, trying to register the fact that this is the child whose room he stumbled upon, and this is what happens when his unit is left to their own devices. They start consorting with nations and adopting kids left and right.

"I don't care what they say about you," the boy spits at him, moving forward to yank up his shirt without any sort of care. "I'll kill you in a *heartbeat* if you try anything."

Kisame jolts and tries to yank it back down before he realizes the brat is healing over the wound on his side, and then he registers the words. He's actually shocked a fair bit, because usually when he gets death threats, they aren't accompanied by healing sessions. Still, the kid means it, and even though Kisame isn't afraid of some Yuki brat, he is respectful of him. This little terror would probably do his damndest to bury him if he so much as stepped a toe out of line. In fact, the boy is probably just *waiting* for an excuse to seek retribution in his guardian's name.

Heh. Cute.

"Gaara," snaps Haku, and the redhead with the best glare out of them straightens to attention. The aforementioned Gaara feels unstable, barely contained and restless, and Samehada shifts on his back. Kisame would bet his right kidney that he's one of the jinchuuriki she spoke of.

"We're camping inside of her room. Nobody gets in or out but our group," Haku orders, and Gaara nods just once, slipping inside the room, followed by two exhausted-looking teens wearing the Suna headband. Kisame notices that the boy casts him one last glance before the door closes, and it speaks volumes more than words could convey.

"Well then, I guess I'll move our stuff," the little pink-haired girl sighs, looking as if she has just woken after a nap. Her hair is matted to the side, sticking up in odd ways, and he notes that she bears a leaf insignia on her headband, same as the blond next to her.

"We can wait until Sasuke gets back," the one who is likely the other jinchuuriki chirps back at her, the most energetic by far. He shuffles from foot to foot, staring at Kisame in a way that is oddly intense, especially considering the fact that the kid maybe comes up to his hip, at most.

" *You* can wait till Sasuke gets back," the girl counters immediately. "Some of us need more than a meal and a quick nap after traveling

for days on end, Naruto."

At this, Zabuza snorts, and Kisame remembers that there were many long months that the unit traveled in such a fashion. Of course, having the most chakra, he had been the least affected, and Zabuza came in a close second. Ryuishi, however, often struggled to keep pace at first.

Which means that the two in front him are green genin, as fresh as spring grass, but better at hiding that fact than some. Most likely a skill they learned from the woman they seem to be intent on guarding.

"Mou, Sakura-chan, don't leave me," the newly-named Naruto whines, and she brushes past Kisame, waving her hand over her shoulder.

"You have Gaara for company-it's not like he sleeps-and Kakashi-sensei is here," she dismisses with a casual wave, beginning her descent down the stairs. He catches a few mumbles about the whole situation being weird, and how she's just not going to deal with it anymore.

Hatake coughs into his fist, and Haku finishes the job to his satisfaction. It's nowhere near fully healed, but Kisame feels like that is on purpose, leaving a weak spot to exploit should the need arise.

"It's a nice house, Zabuza-san," Hatake comments, sharing a glance with the Mokuton user.

Zabuza just grunts, looking at the door to the bedroom with disappointment for a moment. Haku sends him an empathetic glance that nobody really misses, but Naruto simply scowls, shuffling over to place his body as a shield to the entrance.

"Hers, from before," Zabuza finally says, and again Kisame is struck by the sheer amount of planning that seems to go into her schemes. The house is far too large for just one person, but it seems she

decided that she would have all the extra space just in case she needed it.

It must have been lonely, Kisame thinks-wandering the halls with only future hopes to fill them. Hatake makes a small noise of acknowledgement, his single eye scanning the foyer as if contemplating the same thing.

"Well," the other Konoha jounin speaks up, the one whose name Kisame still hasn't caught. "I'm done for the night. See you all in the morning."

Kisame doubts that he's actually going anywhere to get any rest, if the glance he shares with his fellow Konoha-nin is anything to go by. Most likely, he's going to scope out the rest of the house and keep an eye on Itachi. If anything, it seems that only Ryuishi will be getting rest tonight, because the tensions may have died down a bit, but the undercurrent of distrust is still there, running just beneath the surface. Nobody accepts the presence of the ex-Akatsuki members, and Zabuza seems uncomfortable with all the Konoha-nin about, for all that they seemed to work together on the field. It is one thing to fight in battle, but another thing to share a home.

The night wears on, and Kisame settles himself against a wall across from Naruto and Haku. Zabuza takes up a seat to his left, worn but alert, and Hatake does the same thing to his right. Eventually, the pink-haired girl stumbles back up the stairs in a set of sleepwear, lugging a few bags on her back, and she takes a look at them all before deciding it's not worth commenting on. She steps over their sprawled legs and in between the two boys who remain on guard, and pushes the door open silently, grumbling under her breath how being a ninja was far stranger than she expected.

Kisame sympathizes. It's a lot weirder than he expected too.

Ryuishi wakes slowly. With every breath, she struggles for some sort of consciousness, idly creeping her way out of sleep. Somebody is

pounding on her door, but she only recognizes that fact distantly, and it registers as unimportant. She is also aware of small, slender limbs wrapped around her own arm, too small to be an adult and a little unfamiliar. There is the rustling of sand, the scrape of sheets, and a head of hair bumping into her ribs.

When she opens her eyes, the sunlight is pouring through her window, and she notices that her bed is not filled by her alone. A recognizable fabric rests in front of her face, part a pair of pants worn by a child with bright red hair and wide, seafoam green eyes. He stares at her unblinkingly, and she notes that his sand creeps over the room in tendrils, lazily mapping of the grooves on her floor and the texture of her hands. It tickles faintly, like the brush of hair along her stomach.

She blinks, turning her head, and she's faintly surprised to see that the hair is pink. Sakura has curled into a ball next to her, rhythmically puffing out soft breaths in her sleep. Her fair skin seems to glow in the morning light, and Ryuishi takes a moment to appreciate that it remains unblemished for now, not cut or scraped or marked by violence.

Ryuishi sits up, and Sakura snuffles, burrowing her way into the blankets. The older kunoichi takes a moment to brush a stray lock of hair away from the child's nose, and she dazedly turns to Gaara, using the same hand to brush his bangs away from his forehead and peck a kiss there.

He blinks at her, and to her warm satisfaction, he deems her worthy of an embrace, leaning his head into her shoulder for a second. She lets him take the time he needs, sliding her hand through his hair and rubbing his back as she becomes aware of her surroundings.

Temari and Kankuro seem to have made some sort of nest on the floor, sprawled out over blankets and futons. Temari's hair is down, and her mouth is wide open to let out relaxed snores while Kankuro lies belly down, his face buried inside pillows.

Once Gaara shifts back again, she moves. She ignores the scuffle she can hear taking place outside her door, slipping her feet down to the ground and padding her way to the bathroom. She carefully avoids the blanket nest, closes the door behind her, and begins her morning routine. She has had no tea, no morning stretches, nothing like she usually does, and her mind only starts to work around the point she's shaving her legs.

Slowly, the cogs begin to turn inside her groggy mind, and she realizes that she should probably be a bit more concerned about the altercation taking place outside the bathroom. It seems to have drifted in from the hallway, and there a great many voices saying phrases she's not quite awake enough to catch. It's also strange that she never really noticed anyone coming in her room last night, especially the random assortment of children that did. It's a testament to how tired and groggy she was.

She continues her routine, her body going through the motions, her mind drifting elsewhere. She finishes up her shower, applies the right moisturizers and lotions, and throws on her new robe. She's somewhere in between towel drying her hair and contemplating what she wants to eat when the bathroom door crashes open, and Uchiha Sasuke of all people stands glaring at her in the midst of billowing steam.

Ryuishi blinks.

"You knew!" he shouts at her, and her mind struggles to compute what is occurring while simultaneously measuring if she has any fucks left to give. It's stuck between 'confrontation' and 'very, very few' as she weighs the boy in front of her, and the crowd peering around the doorframe in her room behind him.

"Buh?" she manages to get out very articulately.

"You knew and you never said anything! You're the-! I could have-! Plans! *ITACHI* !" Sasuke yells, his eyes crazed and his posture all over the place. He looks rather like he hasn't slept in days, and his

eyes slowly drift closed before snapping open. He gestures wildly at her with an accusing finger, stumbling drunkenly for a second even though he was standing still. Slowly, Ryuishi resumes toweling her hair, squinting at him in an attempt to decode his nonsense.

"Is that a uniform cloak?" Kakashi wonders, peering around the bathroom. It looks much nicer than the one down the hall, and he thinks that it may be the one room in the house he imagined correctly. It's big and ornate, exactly the sort of bathroom he can see her wasting time in.

"It's my trophy," she says, still trying to figure out what the twelve year old is babbling at her about. "Kidnap me and I'll shame your organization. I'm thinking about making the pattern popular with the working girls."

"Please don't," Kisame deadpans at the exact same moment Zabuza remarks, "Good idea."

The two men glance at each other, and behind them, Tenzō has the wild thought that Zabuza-san is a second away from accusing Hoshigaki of being a whore.

Itachi pushes past the crowd gathered at the doorway, and he approaches his brother calmly from behind. The talk went somewhat better than expected, and also somewhat worse as well. There was far less bloodshed than predicted, the anticipated amount of shouting and crying, and more rage than he thought there would be. Sasuke had turned out to be a surprisingly emotion-driven person, all things considered.

"I apologize, Ryuishi-dono," Itachi murmurs, executing a flawless pressure point on his younger sibling. The boy crumples, but not so fast that Itachi cannot catch him before he hits the ground.

Ryuishi doesn't answer, still standing motionless in the middle of her bathroom, staring at the unconscious boy in his brother's arms. She's going to be perfectly honest inside the confines of her own

mind and say that none of this is what she expected to wake up to this morning.

"I-" She closes her mouth abruptly, cutting herself off and turning away from the group, moving to hang up her towel and perhaps begin working smoothing serum into her hair. She can't deal with what is going on. She's not sure she'll ever be able to deal with... whatever this is.

Itachi stares on blankly as he hefts his brother up, watching her go about her business. A niggling sense of worry eats at him, and he supposes that she may deserve an explanation, not only because it was their shared secret for so long, but also because his brother has destroyed her bathroom door.

"I told him the truth," Itachi states, and she hums distractedly, as if filing that information away to exam at a later time. "He was not overly receptive towards the end," he admits, taking that as a cue to continue. "However, I believe his desire to destroy all of Konoha abated once his sensei informed him that Shimura Danzō was dead."

This seems to catch her interest, and she looks up from her mirror, staring at Itachi with a blank expression. There seems to be a moment of incomprehension that surprises him, considering the fact that she admitted to having incredible amounts of foreknowledge the night before.

"Danzō... is dead?" she asks hesitantly, sounding appalled.

"Officially," Kakashi states slowly, aware of the growing group of young teens and adolescents around them. "the Honored Councilman passed away after your abduction due to a terminal condition he kept hidden in an effort to maintain his image."

"Stupid," Sakura mumbles from somewhere behind him, and Kakashi thanks his stars that the girl is too sleepy to register the meaning underneath that statement.

Ryuishi, it seems, is not quite so tired, and her eyes dart back and forth for a moment before she registers what he means. He can see the moment it takes, because she sucks in a breath, her hands clenching into fists.

"That two-timing, rat *fucking* bastard," she hisses. "Swear to me he's dead or *I'll do it myself*. "

"Get in line," Zabuza interjects coldly, meeting her eyes. He went to see the corpse himself, after it was all said and done. He wouldn't put it past Konoha to lie to him about such a thing, but the disdainful, aggravated sneer on Orochimaru's face told him all he needed to know about the dead man on the table. The missing eye pleased Zabuza as well, because the area was fresh and swollen, indicating that it had been done before his life was taken.

"You have to make sure he's gone, absolute sure, or-" The words catch in Ryuishi's throat as she remembers all the comic book villains of her past life. They don't just die. They always crawl back, being revived by some weirdo or cleverly fooling the whole world. Considering the only weirdo who could theoretically revive him is Orochimaru, she's inclined to think he's not actually dead. Her life isn't that easy. Problems don't take care of themselves.

"He's dead," Zabuza tries to reassure her, seeing her suspicion and mania. He moves, taking a step forward in an effort to reach her and possibly calm her down, but a winding trail of sand scrapes along his ankle, holding him back. He turns to the one person who hasn't moved this entire time, and he gives the child on the bed a glance that has had men twice the brat's size rethinking their actions. But Gaara is just as stone-faced as before, and he sees fit to speak for the first time since they all clamored into her bedroom.

"This is *improper*," he reprimands them, eyeing the figures in the room. "You all need to leave."

"What," Kisame says flatly, eyeing the stoic boy. It's easy to do from his vantage point, high above the others.

"Aneue is a *lady*, who is currently *indecent* . You need to go right now, " he says in an almost scolding manner, and Ryuishi takes a moment to wonder where exactly this nonsense is coming from. First of all, Gaara has seen her like this tons of times, and he even dragged Baki along to wake her up once or twice. Secondly, she's fairly certain that the robe she is wearing actually counts among the more conservative outfits she has worn among those assembled in this room.

Also, since when has she been a lady in his eyes? Obviously, some things have changed between them, and yes, she may occasionally dress up and play politics with Orochimaru, but she's never been a lady. For fuck's sake, she doesn't have anywhere near the breeding to qualify for such a title. She's a clanless bastard child with no history, not a fucking lady. Please.

"Didn't you share quarters last night?" Tenzō inquires, assuming the boy's troubles spring from the gender differences.

"I am a ward," Gaara explains succinctly, and Tenzō realizes that it's not a gender boundary, but an age one. By that rule, anybody who he sees as a proper adult should follow the rules of propriety from here out, and it baffles him. It's Ryuishi. Propriety doesn't apply.

"I'm with Gaara on this one," Sakura chimes in, rubbing the final vestiges of sleep from her bright green eyes. "A lot of grown-ups are in here and all she has on is a robe. This is weird."

Ryuishi's eyes narrow. "Excuse me? Whose bed, and further, house are you in right now?"

"Actually, we're in Wind Country, and Gaara is the son of the Kazekage," Kankuro chimes in, rubbing the spot on his back where he was stepped on. That Uchiha boy had the sleepy crazy in him, and it's all the better that he's no longer conscious.

Temari, who has buried her face in the cushions in an attempt to block them all out, lifts her head long enough to aim a punch into

Kankuro's leg. They don't just go around blabbing about who their parents are, especially considering the fact that Temari is almost certain there are several wanted criminals in this room that could wipe the floor with them. Not aggravating the lady who dotes on Gaara and also has a history of literally tearing people apart should be pretty high on their priority list, especially considering that most seem to respect her property. Kankuro needs to shut up or they could die.

Sakura whips around to look at the redheaded boy in a new light, her face incredulous, and it is as if she is realizing who Gaara is for the first time. Her face flickers into surprise, and then-

Apathy. Halfway through it cuts out, and she gives the room around her a dead glance, stopping on her sensei. In that moment, Kakashi can tell that Sakura has reached the same conclusion as he has: this is all ridiculous.

"You know what?" Sakura says, putting her hands on her hips and shaking her head. "Never mind. You're right. It's totally fine that you're in a bathrobe surrounded by five other adults. Your house, your rules. I'm going to find Naruto, does anybody else want to join?"

"As long as Naruto comes with a side of breakfast," Kankuro grumbles, rubbing his leg. He scowls at his sister and pushes off the floor to meet the other girl halfway.

Gaara, it seems, has taken Sakura's words under careful consideration. He blinks at Ryuishi dolefully, and the sand around Zabuza's ankle hesitates.

"Do you... consent?" he asks her seriously, and Ryuishi loses whatever tentative grasp on reality she had. The Uchiha brothers are standing in her bathroom, Kakashi is sending curious glances around her bedroom, and Zabuza looks about a second away from starting a fistfight with a twelve year old.

"Everyone out," she commands, making shooing motions with her hands. "Out with you, every man and child. I don't care if you saw my tits-"

Kisame makes a strangled-sounding noise.

"-but this has gotten weird. Everybody has to go, none shall remain, blah blah blah, *get the fuck outta my room.* "

Tenzō is the quickest to escape, respecting her boundaries, and Itachi sends her the sort of aloof nod that she assumes she would get from a particularly stately feline. The rest play some sort of bizarre version of chicken, only with heavily loaded eye contact, before simultaneously turning as one and quietly filing out like a line of obedient first graders.

The last to go is Gaara, who floats on a bed of sand. He sends her a calm, collected glance that is heavily weighted.

"I don't like them," he tells her, and she closes her eyes, praying for patience. She takes a deep breath, feels her whole stomach extend with the size of it, and then slowly lets it out.

"Good morning, Gaara." She keeps her eyes closed.

"Good morning, Aneue," he echoes smoothly, and then he's moving on, closing the door behind him.

Ryuishi simply sighs. Day one, off to a rocky start.

Obito stumbles through the alley of some backwards city in the bowels of Water Country, using the wall alongside him to remain upright, and he struggles with gravity and the fundamental forces of physics. Around him, the world swims, and even the dim glow that illuminates the fog around him sends a wave of piercing pain through his head. It pounds to the rhythm of his heartbeat, and he stumbles over a trash bag, cursing as the sound of it tumbling against the

ground sends a spear through his temples, and the water of the grimy puddle beneath it soaks into his sandals.

He grimaces, staring at his foot forlornly. Why is everything in Water Country so damn wet?

His gloved hand sweeps upward beneath his mask, and he rubs his eyelids. There is grit caught in his lashes, and it feels like sand, but anything is better than the pressure that pools inside his eyes from the overuse of his Sharingan. Taking on a horde of White Zetsu and escaping before Black Zetsu could do whatever he had planned was hard enough, but then the Paths had gotten involved, and there was paper *everywhere*-

The knot of tension catches in his throat, and he chokes on it.

All his work, years of planning and pain, decades of his blood, sweat, and tears, wasted. Gone in the span of a few days of destruction and madness, brought low by something tiny and insignificant.

Obito sighs, sliding down the wall, managing to settle himself on a relatively dry patch just above the puddle of stink, and he recognizes that maybe he's being a bit dramatic. To be fair, the Akatsuki isn't so much broken as it is... drifting. Kisame was one of the main power sources necessary for sealing the Bijuu, and Itachi's skills were priceless. Their defection would have been enough by itself, but Obito has no illusions that they will be the last.

The problem is a large portion of the Akatsuki has just... vanished, himself included. He has no idea where the original Zetsu went, or how he got away-well alright, he *does* have some clues about that-but he knows that including him, that's four members that have essentially defected within the timespan of a few days. (Of course, it may be bordering three weeks or a month now, as he hasn't exactly been keeping track of time.)

Admittedly, he's not even that upset about any defections that might follow his. How can he be when he was a founding member, and he

himself has gone off to... he doesn't actually know what he's doing. Catching up on mourning? Taking some time to think about his life choices?

His head's a mess. It has been ever since he created whatever strange, symbiotic/sympathetic bond he had with that woman. He wakes in cold sweats, images overlapping inside his head, memories of concrete bunkers layering over underground passages with dirt walls and tree roots. Sometimes the likeness of a phantom with golden eyes shifts into a silhouette bearing the Sharingan, and he can't make a line between what her fears are, and what his own used to be.

It's not something he wants to be aware of either, something he doubts he should be, but his heritage is a doujutsu that grants eidetic memory. He can recall his dreams and night terrors, and he knows himself well enough to recognize that there is something odd going on inside his mindscape that he does not want to acknowledge.

He's not a Yamanaka. He's not trained to create the perfect boundary between himself and others after establishing a connection. He doesn't have the years of breeding it takes to create a specialized bloodline that dabbles selectively in the mental plane, and he's suffering for that. He's not a specialist, not anything other than a particularly skilled shinobi, but his Mangekyō has allowed him to travel entire dimensions. He knows his mind, knows that there is havoc in the back of it, a connection that isn't completely severed. It's blocked off, walled and cemented, and on the other side there is chaos that seeps through in the forms of dreams when he forces himself to sleep, and white hot rushes of emotion when he is awake.

The Void, he knows, is at fault.

That abyss, that howling nothingness that crawled inside his skin and gripped him tight, it held onto him even as he went to shift out of this dimension. It latched on to the vortex his Sharingan opened up, and it stayed there, somewhere inside when it really should have left.

It makes him feel cold. The emptiness brings him back to when he faded in and out, half crushed between the solid earth and several tons of rock, past the point of agony and despair. He can feel himself falling asleep, his breath rattling ever slower in his lungs, his soul separating from his body and drifting off until he was violently thrown back.

This time, there is no Madara there while he comes to. Zetsu is gone, having disappeared into the continent after acknowledging his betrayal.

Obito chokes back a sob. He's a man now, not a boy, but it still aches and bleeds. The wound is as raw as when he first received it, not dulled or sharpened by time because of the gifts his blood gave him. The image of Rin's stunned expression as she's run through by cackling lightening, her slumping form and hunched body becoming nothing more than an empty shell, the scene will haunt him to the grave.

Rin would weep if she could see you now.

He doesn't want to think about it. The things he has done would make the boy he was wail in outrage, would make nations howl for his blood. If anybody figured out the extent of his wayward schemes, they would invent new and creative tortures especially tailored for him. There is no undoing his actions, no going back in time. He cannot move forward either, until he finds which way his path should take.

Stuck somewhere between his treason and his grief, he wallows in inaction and contemplates the other. The image superimposed over Rin when he journeyed through their tangled psyches, the girl with freckles and curly hair.

If Rin would weep for him, what would that girl do for Watanabe? Who was she, and why did her ghost haunt her mental plane like a shining light in the darkness, some unreachable hope, a goal torn away? Why is it that they joined together in the first place?

Who is Watanabe, and why does she seem to be at the root of so much?

It frustrates him to no end how she knew so much, how she seemed knowledgeable about facts that nobody should have had. She was supposed to be weak, to be malleable and changeable in that state, easy to mold due to her dependence on the swordsman and her own unsure mentality. If anything, she should be where he is, exhausted and worn, her plans crumpling around her ears.

In a way, he supposes they might be. He knows that Grass was a kettle just waiting to boil over, and it seems to have reached its peak in her absence. There is war there, full-blown anarchy between the people. He knows that some of her forces have receded from the area, masses moving in exodus to the perceived safety of Sound. He also knows that when he absconded, there seemed to be a fresh spark to re-ignite an old fire. A group moving through, hitting hard and fast before fleeing into the wilds. Fear tactics, terrorism, and guerrilla warfare.

Usually, shinobi would be able to snuff them out. There is a reason chakra users have an advantage over the civilian populace. A single well trained shinobi can wipe an entire town clean, but there is chaos in the ranks of Kusagakure. The daimyo is dead, fresh in his grave, and nobody's quite sure what comes next, who takes the reigns.

If Obito had to guess, he would say that it wasn't even a proper assassination. It was a rudimentary one, likely a servant girl or errand boy, some of the few people to attend to the leader in his time of defeat. He was vocal about his dislike of the Rakki Ryuu, his detriment of the notion of equality, and his despair at his loss of station in the noble courts.

Ideally, it was the perfect place to leave him, a tiger without claws or teeth, only a pitiful roar to whine on with. He was an example of how low she could bring someone, a threat that was more like a promise to those who ran against him.

His recent death steps over that line, though. Now the nobles have something to fear outright, rather than panic at a vague notion. They have evidence that the rebels will rise, that they will come into their homes and take them while they sleep. Though they are not smart or clever, the nobles have years of rule to their name, generations of hereditary right. If it is not them keeping the peace, then who will reign?

Chaos, they will say. Chaos and bloodshed, never mind their own history of warfare and disputes. They will liken this back to the time of warring clans, only worse, because now the civilians have gotten involved.

Obito can't see the outcome here either. He only knows that her absence seems to have unleashed something that was straining behind the scenes. Though he knows she can't yet be back in action because of the nature of her medication, the need for the chemicals to build in her system, he acknowledges that others will not be privy to this information. They will see this rogue group, hitting hard and hiding, using base weapons to cause mass devastation, and they will see them calling out her name.

It is a doomed venture. Once the nations gather their wits and the daimyo lash out in fear, the ones bearing her flag will be hunted down with ease. Shinobi, after all, have training and experience on their side.

But the problem remains that many nations have been attempting to hunt down her groups for years, and though there have been pocket populations discovered and exterminated, a core founding of their way of life seems to be surviving with little or no aid. It makes sense, considering they sprung from the depths of old Kirigakure, where only scrappy, scavenging types could survive, but for those hunting them, it is a nightmare. For years they have been considered ghosts, invisible as they track across the land, blending in with the ordinary population.

Population itself is another huge problem. It's been years since this began, and with the fairly recent improvement in farming and agriculture, there has been a boom. It seemed the Rakki Ryuu came by her fertility mythos honestly, because where she went improving medicine and food sourcing, health improved and pregnancy rates went up. Longer lives and better quality of life meant that the population was growing. There were more elders, and far, far more children among the lower and middle classes. Everywhere one turned there were toddlers and adolescents and teens, all taught the wonders of the world by the parents she ingratiated.

So there is this entropy, this burgeoning cataclysm that he can claim a small hand in helping create. The world loses itself as he tries to discover what makes him, and somewhere, a madwoman recovers to find herself without her power base.

Bitterly, he only thinks it is fair. He has lost control of the Akatsuki, and she seems to have stabbed herself in the foot with her sects. Nothing is going right for anyone at all.

But maybe that's for the best.

Outwardly, he sighs, still rubbing his eyes. No, he decides, it's not for the best. There needs to be some semblance of order, someone manning the stations and directing things. If nobody is in control, and everybody thinks they are, then nothing works. It becomes a minute, street-level campaign to dominate, every person looking out for them and theirs against everyone else.

Nothing makes sense, and he hurts as much inside as he does out. Everything seems to be spiraling out of anyone's control, and there is only madness left. Hidan, he thinks, must be delighted.

(Indeed, the Jashinist celebrates, because Obito is right. Hidan *is* delighted. The world is going to shit, and *he called it*. Heathen fuckers are drowning in their own ignorance and sin. Those that made materialism their life will suffer, and those that sought to fool themselves will be shown the Way. The baker is to be the bread

maker, the butcher to clean the gutted livestock, and a shinobi is a shinobi. Denying these facts causes havoc, opens up the world for things like *her* to crawl in and take advantage.

Now is the time for ascension. There are people dancing on the flames of damnation and new order emerges with strange ideals to enforce. Change is the word of the day, and it's best served with a good helping of bloodshed.

He knew that she was the embodiment of pandemonium, the dawning of a new age. What a time to be alive.)

AN: Couple of points here. One, before anyone complains, I didn't write Itachi and Sasuke's confrontation scene for a reason. NO, it's not just resolved. No, it's not over. There is more to be said on that, but I wanted to stay sorta realistic. Two, things are not all swell inside Ryuishi's home. Nobody trusts anybody, but they also have no sleep, no rest, and have been dealing with back to back travel and missions for a while. They are exhausted. As for the bond between Ryuishi and Obito, she doesn't notice it because technically, her head is still a wreck, and she can't recognize him in the mess. She's pretty used to weird sectioned out parts and pieces, and the headaches and migraines she has she's written off because she thinks they are normal.

Bless my lurker, favers and follows. My reviewers are my jim-jams, and your notes help me keep strong, and also point out logical fallacy's I have. Just... be gentle. My ego is fragile.

My Beta Enbi has my sincerest thanks, and I am more than excited to cheer them on in their upcoming milestone. May happiness and wisdom follow them.

In Which the Day Keeps Dragging On

I do not own Naruto.

It feels like a lifetime since she's held it in her hands.

The cool metal links slide against her palms like rivulets of liquid, ice cold and fresh from the depths of a summoning scroll. At first, she didn't understand why Zabuza had taken one out from his pockets and presented it to her, but after she unsealed it, after she had pooled chakra to her fingertips and the puff of smoke cleared, she quickly learned why.

Her pack, worn and beaten, inked with faded seals and ragged thread in areas, is almost as much a part of her as a limb. She forgot how much she missed it for a few brief days, but she could never actually forget it. The phantom weight of it bearing down on her shoulders and waist haunted her in the Akatsuki base, and now, having it back was like reclaiming a hand that had been torn away. And if her pack was a hand, than her meteor hammer was an arm, or a leg, or a limb that had been missing for far too long.

It's true that she doesn't need it. She's trained enough to be able to take a life with her bare hands, to stop an enemy by twisting and shaping her chakra alone, but... that doesn't mean she doesn't *want* it. She doesn't need her eyeliner, or her shampoos and perfumes, but she *wants* them. They are little pieces and bits that make life more bearable, that help her sort and filter out what it is, exactly, to be her.

Kisame watches her through hooded eyes as she caresses the chain-links, her toes curling in the sand, and Zabuza seems to understand it as well. The Konoha-nin seem curious though, and the Suna nin are at least a little intrigued.

"I don't get it," Naruto states, leaning over the railing of the porch. He seems to have taken well to the warm weather and sunshine, his pants rolled up above his knees, his shirt lost somewhere inside the mess her room has become. Several young teens and adolescents claiming it as base camp means that there are bits and bobs strewn all about, and nobody is sure where one mess ends and another person's begins.

Ryuishi swallows past the lump in her throat, begging herself to get her shit together. There have been too many tears in the past few months, and she's not about to go weeping over a weapon.

(But it's never been just a weapon, it's hers, and it's been with her when nothing else has. It's her strength, her history, her foundation. She first killed a man with her bare hands and baby teeth, but her meteor hammer lets her put distance between them, makes her strong, lets her have steel chains when her knees knock.)

"Kiri," Kisame says, his voice resonating in a strange way, "has different views on things than Konoha. You can learn to wield several different tools, and most good ninja have skill enough with all weapons to utilize them in an emergency, but there is always that *one* ."

Zabuza nods, and strangely enough, so does Temari, stroking the top of her fan thoughtfully. It's true that the Leaf village specializes in diversifying their talents, and they have a few masters in differing styles-Gai, for one, is definitely a taijutsu master, and there is that one ANBU with the wakizashi-but Kiri produces the sort of people who dedicate their lives to mastering and furthering one style. The Seven Swordsmen are a prime example of this, each one having a niche blade that they have spent years of their life learning to wield, painstakingly working to become the best of the best with a specialized tool. Sure, they can also throw kunai and shuriken, and yes, some can use the blades interchangeably, but when it comes down to it, there is always one that suits them more than the others.

Ryuishi never had a master, and she diversified her talents in order to best survive all the situations that came her way. Hell, she had to cobble together several different forms to make her taijutsu style, and her genjutsu was built almost from scratch, using only the bare theory Kiri gave her, but her meteor hammer is something she takes pride in. It's hers, nobody else's, never owned by another or handed down.

"In Kiri," she chokes out, pausing to cough and clear her throat. She blinks back her emotions and settles herself with a deep breath. "In Kiri, because of the short supply during the war, looting bodies wasn't uncommon, but there was one thing a good ninja didn't take, and that was a main weapon. A main weapon was used to identify corpses, and it was meant to be passed down. In the case of revenge killing, if somebody fell during battle, often times-"

"-their comrades took the weapon in order to kill the one who ended them on the battlefield," Zabuza finishes, and she looks up to see him staring at her. She sucks in a short breath, because he seriously considered doing that when he knew his best bet would be to use Kubikiribōchō. It's fucked up, but she's touched. He got her right in the fucking feels with that one.

Kisame, who seems to be the recipient of several hard stares alongside Itachi, nods acceptingly. He understands the concept of vengeance killing, perhaps better than the others will ever understand. After all, even he knew better than to slay his master with his own blade.

"The blood was meant to mollify the souls of the dead, if you believe some of the more superstitious shinobi," he says, feeling solemn. Zabuza really meant to go all out if it came down to it, didn't he?

Even Kakashi seems to understand, nodding his head alongside the others. It's a belief that may be more common in Water Country these days, but the Hatake clan did descend from Samurai, and though a shinobi has no real concept of honor, there are sacred traditions. This one is not unheard of, and besides the legends of

hundred year old blades-like the ones resting on the swordsmen's backs-it was one he accepted as he grew as well.

Sakura looks between a dewy-eyed Ryuishi and her grown teammates, appalled by all the meaningful eye contact going on. Even her teacher is nodding his head in understanding, looking for all the world like they have reached some higher concept of understanding.

"What the *fuck*," she whispers to herself, using a phrase she had heard uttered by the kunoichi in question.

Ryuishi just sniffs, turning to the weapon in her hands once more. She walks back a bit, far away enough from the porch that the obstruction won't interrupt her flow, and she whirls the weapon loosely in her hands, getting used to the comforting weight of it. The metal shines, a fresh coat of oil along its length, and the blades sing as they cut through the air, honed to an expert edge by Zabuza's skilled hand. He took such good care of it when she was away, and she could kiss him for it.

"It got longer," Kisame comments idly, and she smiles, twisting back in a display of flexibility to send it shooting off in another direction completely with a twitch of her foot. It whistles as it snaps through the air, impaling an invisible opponent.

"I got bigger. New links had to be added as I grew, and the Otokage was kind enough to help me get the weapon altered to fit my form better," she informs them, looping the chains as she twists and turns.

Helpfully, or perhaps curiously, Gaara forms a makeshift clone from sand, and before it can even take shape fully, a length of chain wraps around its shoulder, and with a near silent grunt, the arm pops off and collapses into a heap of sand. Another flick of her wrist and the other end blurs as it lodges itself where an eye would be.

The redhead stares at the pile unflinchingly, but his brother swallows audibly beside him, laughing nervously.

"Ahaha, that's... She really is a jounin, isn't she?" he says, feeling a cold sweat start to form. This was the lady who sold candy and tripped over curtains in the bazaar. She wasn't supposed to be a mass-murdering legend.

He receives several sidelong looks from those present, each adult considering the answer in their head.

"Technically," Tenzō says, his head tilted in thought, "she only ever received chunin rank from her village."

This seems to snap Temari out of her musing, and she stares at the group, her expression dead. "What," she says, and it's not a question.

Kakashi nods along with his kōhai, his hand tucked under his chin. He knows rank can often times be misleading, especially in cases of defection. Time can allow all sorts of skills to accumulate, and he doesn't know how far she'd rank these days.

Zabuza, it seems, has a firm idea of where she should be, and though he doesn't voice his opinion, Kisame does.

"I wouldn't worry about it. Field promotions were common back then, and they weren't a very good indication of skill. I don't know if she could live up to the title back then, but she can definitely do it by now," he hums thoughtfully.

"Live up to it now?" Sasuke asks, still a bit unsteady and unsure of everything that is going on. He's taken to ignoring everything now, because if Itachi doesn't exist, then neither does any of that other stuff. He's going to repress it all until he can sit back and think about it with more than a three hour nap and without the fear of crazy consuming him.

A silver blur whizzes dangerously close to Kisame's face, centimeters away from his nose. A twist of an ankle, and the blade jerks from its sideways momentum, leaving the faintest scratch on

his skin. A moment passes as the metal whirls away, and a thin line of red beads up. He grunts, unamused.

"Talk shit, get hit," Naruto says, channeling his sister's thoughts completely. Haku holds up his palm as a treat, and Naruto wordlessly high fives him.

"Kisame's just jealous he had to take a stupid test while me and Zabuza got promoted the old fashioned way," she chirps, her face twisting into a picture of joy as she manipulates her weapon. By Buddha, she never could throw things right because once they left her hand, they seemed to tumble and flop, but the chain always allowed her to make last minute adjustments to the flight path. It was her sense of safety, her security blanket in the middle of battle.

" *Kisame*," the man himself says, "is glad he took a stupid test instead of getting a promotion because the ranks were thinning out, and my commanding officer died."

Zabuza shrugs, and if she could, Ryuishi would as well. It's nothing much to them, because after Squad Eleven they learned not to get attached. The squads would flux and change, and only the unit remained together. Such was the way of things.

"Why is it that I've known you for years, but only now get to learn such things?" Kakashi asks pointedly. The 'when you knew so much' goes unsaid.

It's a tricky question, and in the space below, Ryuishi hesitates. The end of her weapon goes awry, pitching itself into the beige grains of sand, and she frowns, because even though it will only be dulled ever so slightly, Zabuza spent a long time honing that. She could tell.

Her arms drop to her sides, and she shifts her mind away from the answer, pointedly focusing on the tingle of warm sunlight that flows into her fingers and the cry of gulls off in the distance. It's nice to be home, she thinks, listening to the crash of the waves. Maybe she should go fishing later.

On the porch, Kakashi watches her turn her face away, and he can't help but feel a bit of bitterness. It's not fair, and though he knows that things never are, he thinks that maybe she should have tried at least a little bit. Obito is alive, she saw him. She was there with him, and yes, he did horrible things. He's conflicted about that. He needs to figure it out.

More than that, though, how long had she known? How long had she not told him that the boy he mourned for, the team he knew... How long had she kept it hidden? She knew his story-in theory, at least. The fact remains it's all speculation, and he won't really believe anything until he sees him for himself, but the theory...

She knew and she shouldn't. The rubble, the eye, Rin. He hates that she stowed it away, finds it despicable and wrong because she kept so many secrets, hid so many things. She knew him like she read his story from a book, and she pulled the strings of everybody around her like puppets.

Maybe it's the worry he held for her, or the strange clenching he gets in his gut when she smiles, but he just wants... he wants her to be better. To not be playing this game, to be dancing around with a mask when she faces them all. She's not telling him everything, and there is so much still being withheld. Itachi, he knows, probably caught on sooner, but the boy was always smarter than he let on, and wiser than Kakashi in spades. It's what makes him so dangerous to face on the battlefield.

Who is Kaguya? What is Zetsu? How does she know so much that she absolutely shouldn't?

"Wow," Ryuishi says finally, "Captain Hatake of the SS Killjoy, everybody."

"What the hell is SS?" Kankuro wonders, and she mumbles something under her breath, swiping her palm over her eyes. She looks tired all of a sudden, like the weight of the world has come crumbling down on her back.

"Look, just, never mind. Somebody throw me my pack so I can dig something fun out of it before I'm tempted to do something dumb," she says, winding her weapon back up with quick, jerky movements of her hands.

"On it," Naruto calls out, and he drops from the railing of the porch and makes his way over to her things. He's determined to show off, because he's a ninja now, and he can finally lift her bag.

He wraps his hand around the shoulder strap of one side, and grunts as he heaves it up. A flash of blue and white catches Kakashi's eye, yet it's Tenzo who shouts out the warning.

"Wait!"

But it's too late. Naruto puts his entire body into the throw, and he twists, lobbing it out to his sister in the sand.

The other jounin present spot the anomaly automatically, and to her credit, Ryuishi also spots the odd shape as the tumbling bag turning in the air dislodges it, sending it flying. Her head snaps toward the curling, winding form and she darts off to catch it, leaving her pack to slide down in the ground, momentarily forgotten.

"Is that a-?" Sasuke begins to ask, but Itachi has already hurled himself over the railing in an effort to stop the kunoichi, and Kisame and Zabuza don't take long to follow. Even Kakashi goes after them once he realizes the danger. He might have problems with her, but she had a fit of some sort last night when pressed too hard. He doesn't want to see what sort of stress she can go through before it breaks her.

Tenzo is left staring in shock at the bag -the seals, how could they forget the seals reacted to her chakra, and she'd been subtly leaking like sieve when she saw her bag, excitement dripping out of her pores. He's been watching, always watching, because he considers her his property, and he always watches what is his.

"Get away from it!" Kisame barks, but Ryuishi has a head start, and she lunges, desperate for contact to the outside. Her joyous mood is gone, and she is consumed with the desire to know, to understand what's happening. How long has it been, *how much has she lost* -?

She moves, arms outstretched, and her fingertips are just long enough to catch the falling serpent. It writhes inside her hand, white and blue bands flashing, and it's strange flat tail slaps her wrists before it winds around her hands.

"You guys can suck a dick!" she shouts victoriously, and the summon headbutts her thumb kindly, it's unblinking eyes acknowledging her existence. She's fed the little vipers and constrictors of Orochimaru's collection enough times to get a reputation, and it seems this little sea krait knows her before she knows it.

"Hello baby," she coos at it, her legs still working beneath her. She needs distance, needs to have space before she can ask it anything. (That is, assuming this one can talk. They don't always, in fact, most don't, but they have other ways of communicating.)

There's a flash to her left, and her eyes dart in that direction. She rolls underneath the incoming blow, tucking the creature close to her chest. It's too long to properly close her hands around, but it's ropey body winds around her arm, holding on to her as tightly as she does to it.

Itachi soars over her, leg extended like he had intended to kick the snake out of her hands. There is a moment of eye contact, where he sees her sliding beneath him, clutching very tightly to something very deadly. It's both a metaphor, and literal.

"Hand it over," Kisame demands from... somewhere, but she doesn't. She feels the shock of water against her skin, and the sand beneath his feet explodes in fury the moment her tries to grab her foot. He roars as it cocoons around him, and she sends a grateful look back to Gaara, accompanied by an honest smile. Though her

eyesight is poor, it's good enough to catch the mischievous grin he sends her in return, hidden from prying eyes.

Ryuishi scrambles to stand up, falling into stance, and she belatedly realizes she's surrounded. Kisame may have been dropped farther back, and Tenzo is on the porch, but Kakashi and Zabuza are flanking her, crouched low.

Her heart beats wildly in her chest, and the wet sand shifts in between her toes, gritty and cool. She hears a rush, feels the wet wash of a wave slap against the back of her calves. The break is further out, but the foam washes over her bare feet while she tries to keep watch of both of them at once.

"Hey, come on now," Kakashi tries to soothe, his voice pitched down low. "Just let it go. It's all right."

"What the fuck are you guys doing?" she growls, beginning to feel angry and afraid. The sensation shifts inside her bowels, and climbs its way to her throat. Instinctively, she brings the snake closer to her chest, wary of her pursuers. It extends itself, climbing its way closer, wedging itself between the valley of her breasts, its tongue poking out to flick her collarbone.

"Nothing. Hand it over," deflects Zabuza, but her mind is whirring to life, the soft buzz of all her parts almost functional. They glitch every few moments, and the monster is lurking in her veins, but she can use her brain. She can think.

"What are you trying to hide? Why won't you let me have this?" she snaps angrily, backing into the waves.

("WHICH ONE OF YOU BRATS CONTROLS SAND?" Kisame roars, slicing at the tendrils that race after him. None of the children are quite unsubtle enough to look at Gaara, but they do snicker.)

"That is a dangerous, *highly venomous sea snake*," Kakashi stresses. "I'm not sure what it was doing in your bag or why you

carry it around-"

"Cut the shit," she snarls, wading backwards until the water comes up to around her knees. Both men halt, knowing that if she gets too deep, or dives under, it's a lost cause. Even shark summons will have trouble in an unfamiliar terrain, and she knows these waters best; the caverns and pockets, the rock croppings to rest in.

"We can talk," Zabuza offers, feeling truly desperate. He hates talking, but he'll do it. He doesn't want her to find out like this, not when she isn't ready.

The snake's head reaches her shoulder, it's mouth perilously close to her neck and the band of scar tissue that winds around it. Its tongue flickers, and just for a moment, Kakashi has enough time to think that they were wrong, and Orochimaru would rather kill her than let any of his secrets slip out.

It opens its mouth wide, quivers, and the thought slips away as a scroll emerges. It's disgusting enough to witness the cylinder coated in digestive juices emerge, let alone watch it touch her skin and roll before she catches it with a swift movement of her hand.

They pause, and the waves roll in, the unending tide drawing her closer. The sand slips under her feet, drawn out by the power of the water, and she adjusts to compensate her balance as they stare at her. A little ways behind them, Itachi stares on, and Kisame finally breaks free of the sand with an angry swipe of his sword. The blade opens it's mouth, and Haku recoils as he senses the chakra moving the earth slips away inside of it.

"What are you hiding," she hisses, fingers clamped around the scroll. Her thumb hovers over the ink and wax seal, ready.

"Just let it go," Zabuza says, and for a moment Ryuishi hesitates. She entertains thoughts of ending it, right here and now, stepping away from it all. Maybe she could build a boat, be the first seafaring explorer of this new world. Maybe she could live out her days

peacefully-after all, Gaara and his siblings are here. Naruto and Haku as well, and all her friends over the years. It would be a nice place to stop, and nobody could blame her, not after what she's been through.

She grits her teeth, and flicks it open with a pulse of chakra and her thumbnail. Peace doesn't exist, and she has to move forward. She has messes to clean up, and she's not going to just leave it for others to do. If she's fucked up, she'll take responsibility. She's not dead yet.

The paper unfurls, and the two of them lunge the same moment she drops down. The sea krait on her shivers at the temperature change and shoots upwards, seeking out the heat of her neck and the rhythm of her pulse.

There's splashing as the water embraces her and the salt stings her eyes, which flick up and down to read the missive within. It's coded, and lengthy, not to mention definitely not waterproof, but Ryuishi has been working with Orochimaru for years. She knows his patterns, the few he holds, and the things he favors. She can snap up the information quickly.

The serpent wrapped around her neck darts forward, and she hears a muffled curse as Zabuza dodges out of its strike range, stumbling back in the water. A stifled sense of panic rises in her chest, both at the sensation of something smooth and cold near her neck, and the information within.

Hands grab her from behind, and she doesn't even struggle as she is hefted up. The snake darts out again, but she raises her trembling hand to soothe it. Warned and trained, it seeks out her fingers, lapping up the seawater that coats them as the ink drips down the parchment page.

"Let it go," Kakashi says calmly, his arms wrapped around her chest. His fingers brush the side of her ribs, his arms like cage bars, and

somebody on the porch squawks indignantly, but she's too lost to make a joke.

"Hanako," she keens, feeling betrayed. The tribe has defected, gone rogue, and completely lost its shit. Orochimaru has been juggling the markets, but he's that's not his expertise, it's hers. The stores are backed up, because he figured hoarding goods would be better than flooding the market. Oh God, the merchants are going to be pissed, why is the Grass daimyo fucking *dead*-

"Breathe," Kakashi hums in her ear, and she takes a shuddering breath for the first time, remembering to inhale. She's desperately trying to memorize the characters before they melt away into the sea. She has the gist but the devil is in the details. Sunagakure placed first in the Chuunin Exams-gotta congratulate Gaara again-and missions are trickling into Otogakure due to its good showing and second place win. The commissions of finer things and force are enough to keep up their wealth but around them places are slowly, slowly, slowly tanking, which will lead to a fall out of goods in the market because of economic interdependence. Fixing this is going to be a bitch.

"Tsunade is Hokage?" she croaks out. "The Third retired- *treatise of goods and arms with Oto in the face of future turmoil, **what the flying fuck*** - "

"Stop, just stop now," Zabuza says, approaching them.

She snaps, her fingers curled into a fist on the paper. "- *losses in the network, patches of Grass no longer able to allocate resources due to civil unrest* -" A civil war. She sparked a civil war.

"It's going to be alright," Kakashi soothes, and she wants to scream, wants to thrash like a child and squeal like an enraged animal, but she can't tear her eyes away from the characters. She's lost inside the words, and her focus is the only thing keeping her together.

"- bolstering of forces and border security, armament causing unrest with Kumogakure, though Kirigakure seems amicable to the idea of equilateral exchanges, requesting presence of the Lady of Oto in order to conduct further establishment of communication -" The words spill from her mouth while she stares ahead blankly. "- loss of communication in joint venture with Iwagakure, suspected alliance with Kusa, or inflamed nobility reacting poorly to upheaval. Urgent request to -"

"Enough," Kisame orders, wading forwards and ripping the paper out of her hands. She whines as it tears along her fist, and the vibrations send the snake around her neck into a state of wariness. It lifts its head, and Kisame sneers at it in disgust as he tosses the limp bits back, intending for them to hit the water.

(Itachi, however, has a different idea. He catches it delicately, and there is a flash of red before he drops it again. It goes almost unnoticed by most.)

Kisame reaches out, but Ryuishi switches her gaze from the paper to him. She hisses, boiling angry and panicking. "Three months," she accuses him. Three months and then some, just enough time for everything to go to absolute *shit* .

He freezes for a moment, but he regains his balance, nodding his head. He won't run away from what he has done. "Three months, and I regret what I have done. You have your choice, if you want to choose to send me away-"

She cuts him off and laughs, loud and cruel. Even Kakashi seems startled at the sound of it, and Zabuza frowns beneath his mask. He's the only one who knows its roots, knows that it stems from the same one who had a summon tied to her bag: Orochimaru. The man will know she's back, if not immediately, then before the sun has set this day.

" You aren't allowed to just run off," she seethes, collecting herself. "You helped cause this and by Dewi Sri, *you will fix it.* "

He frowns, because alongside the lifetime of nut shots, it seems like his punishments are just adding up. Still it makes sense, in a way...

"Fine," he agrees, and this seems to mollify her just the slightest bit. "But first, can Hatake let go of your breast?"

For a moment she seems thrown by the change of subject, and he's not above admitting that it feels nice to let her be the baffled one for once. It's petty, but it's also bothering him because of what Gaara said earlier. Technically, there are laws of propriety to be respected now that they are all adults, and it's one thing in the heat of battle or the middle of a fight, but he doesn't trust the Konoha-nin, and it's been a suspiciously long time.

"I... what?" She makes a face and shifts, and it seems to come to her notice for the first time that Kakashi has his arms around her ribs, and his left palm of directly on her right breast.

Itachi coughs pointedly, and Kakashi feels the life drain out of him. No matter what he does now, he looks guilty.

" *Civil war*," Ryuishi enunciates, sending a heated glare at the swordsman. There is a fight taking place between the people and he's worried about a fucking boob. It's her boob. Why is he even worried?

"It's just... y'know?" Kisame explains eloquently, feeling embarrassed for bringing it up. He thought she would at least notice- what kind of life has she been leading?

"No," she says slowly, "I-"

"AY! AY! AY AH!" a voice shouts, followed by splashing. A cannonball of orange worms himself between the bigger figure, and Zabuza watches on in vague amusement as the group of children wedges itself in, followed by Tenzō, who takes one look at the situation and sends a heated glare at his senpai. Kakashi merely keeps the stoic deadpan he has assumed for the preceding events.

"Hands off the lady!" Naruto exclaims, sounding suspiciously like this isn't the first time he's had to confront a group of people over such a thing. "We have a thing called consent here."

Zabuza barks out a laugh, and Itachi sighs, connecting more dots inside his head.

"Naruto," Ryuishi groans, feeling utterly exasperated.

He turns his blue eyes on her, and then suspiciously scans the groups around her. Eventually, after examining them all, he turns back to her. "Are you consenting?" he asks.

Ryuishi uses her free hand to cover her eyes and lets out a sigh. At least, she thinks, this is better than a panic attack. There's no way to work herself up when Kisame is talking such nonsense.

"We were... sparring," she explains, trying to pull something together. When she peels her palm away, not many look like they believe her, but Naruto does.

"Ah, so that's a normal thing, then?" he inquires.

"I don't know. How many times has there been accidental groping between Ino and you, Sakura?" Ryuishi says, turning to the girl.

Sakura, who was sending victorious looks at Haku, wheezes and sputters. Her face turns cherry red, earning her a suspicious glance from her other teammate, and Temari.

"I j-j-just... you know-" she manages to choke out before clamming up.

Ryuishi raises an eyebrow, and she feels like if it could, it would keep going up until it disappeared off her forehead completely. She was making a point, but this is an interesting development.

"Your village is weird," Zabuza remarks to Kakashi, thoroughly entertained and yet still deadpan.

The accused finally removes his hand from her boob and he utilizes it to gesture at Samehada, who looks nothing more than a hungry dog at a buffet who suddenly caught a case of fleas. It shivers at the proximity to the jinchuuriki, but huffs warily at the chakra flowing just beneath Ryuishi's skin.

"That's something, considering that is a living sword, and both of you have sharpened teeth. I won't even bring up the Ningyo," he deadpans.

"You have lost your holding privileges," Ryuishi announces, squirming enough that she can drop out of his grasp and into the water. Her pants are thoroughly soaked, and when she scans the waves, the missive is already gone, torn to bits by the current and stomping feet.

Gaara immediately takes a position by her side, and she notices that he's standing atop the water instead of in it. She remembers he's not entirely comfortable with liquid because of his natural defense, and she plants a kiss on top of his head, both for his bravery and for the earlier trick with the sand. She has to stretch a bit to do it, considering she's submerged to her knees, but he remains short for now, and it's worth it.

The boy puffs up in pride, chest inflating and face stoic. His sister sends him a knowing glance before curiously appraising the situation, and Kankuro just scoffs.

"The Sannin," Zabuza points out, referencing the individual eccentricities of every single one of them.

"The Kaijuu," Itachi counters, and Tenzō just nods in agreement.

"Well, whatever. Things to do, shit to pack," Ryuishi bites out. Kisame makes a sound of protest, and even Haku seems torn on following her or telling her to stay put and rest. He decides on the former, with a touch of recommending the latter, because his mother seems to be in a snit right now and most likely won't listen until later.

"I guess Suna wins," Kankuro says, unsure of what exactly is going on.

"Suna wins," Sasuke echoes, and he seems entirely content to stare straight ahead, as if the brother that stands beside him doesn't exist. If he doesn't, then nothing is wrong, and Sasuke can save his energy to comprehend the situation at hand. He's barely coping as it is. The Itachi Situation threatens the tentative grasp of sanity he has left, and he doesn't want to end up like the woman storming away with a deadly serpent wrapped around her scarred neck.

"Corpse puppets," Sakura snaps, still flushed red, stomping after the two. The reference to the original composition of the weapon on his back doesn't go unnoticed, making Kankuro wince.

"What?" Naruto says, catching up to Gaara, who remains as impassive and proud as he first was.

The redhead shrugs, turning to his surrogate brother. "I like it here," he says in lieu of a response. It's wild and unruly, and he doesn't approve of many of the things going on, but it's less stiff and stifled than his home. It has a strange charm to it, he decides, and though he is never going to accept some things, he knows that when he wants to talk, he will be heard.

"Yeah. It's pretty neat," Naruto agrees, shifting to the subject change.

The two of them watch the group wander off, and they are left with the rest. Kakashi, it seems, is entirely content to act like he simply decided to wander in the ocean of his own volition, and the swordsmen are sending glances at each other, as if communicating through eye contact alone.

Tenzō turns to the children remaining, and he looks them over before glancing up to the sky. It seems like everything is just getting stranger as they go on. *Please*, he prays, *please let me have one good night's rest before we have to travel again*. It's a good short

term goal, and at this point, short term is all he has. He stopped trying to figure out the long term ages ago.

It's sunset when Orochimaru feels the stunted pulse of chakra on his wrists, the sealing tattoos on his arms sending a sensation of writhing underneath his skin. He looks away from the ceiling, curious, because Kabuto is in town, and that leaves only one other to activate his seal.

His golden eyes flicker downward, and he casually pulls up the sleeve of his robe. His teeth are sharp enough to prick the pad of his thumb, parting the soft flesh, and a drop of blood wells up. He takes a single moment to appreciate the brilliant spot of color on his otherwise sallow skin before he infuses it with chakra and smears it across the seal.

A puff of smoke, and a sea krait rests around his arms, unblinking eyes staring into nothing, still warm from the touch of sunlight and another's skin.

"Well..." he rasps, smiling to himself. He doesn't finish the thought out loud, but he does allow the sensation of warm satisfaction to crawl up into his chest, curling around his lungs like a living thing.

He draws a finger across the smooth scales of the serpent, and it tastes the air, leaning into his touch. Such a simple creature, the sea krait, and yet, for all its plainness, it is among the most dangerous summons in his repertoire.

"How fortunate," he hisses, and the coiled serpent on his lap shivers, twists, and then opens its jaws wide. He waits patiently for the scroll to arrive, and when it does, he caresses its head fondly once more before dismissing it.

For a moment, he simply examines the scroll, small and thin, and he appreciates the elation rising in his chest. *Such a clever girl*, he thinks fondly. It only makes sense that she would escape the

Akatsuki as he once did-after all, she is one of his crowning achievements.

He flicks the missive open, scanning it at a rapid pace. At first he is amused by the hasty, sloppy scrawl of her handwriting, but the more he reads, the more that sense of satisfaction begins to turn sour on his tongue.

It is to her credit that she managed to sway her one-time commander into defection, and even more laudable that she sank her teeth into Uchiha Itachi before the betrayal of his clan, but she is acting foolish. Greedy, even. Once she was collected enough to think, and once her little coterie found her again, she should have eliminated them both. Her unit commander used her. The only thing he should be doing now is slowly rotting away for the crimes he has committed.

Orochimaru would have been delighted to have been presented with the Uchiha's body, be it alive or dead, and though he realizes she is nowhere near powerful enough to slay them in battle, she has them close. She can use poison, or assassination, or any number of methods. But the fact remains that she didn't, that she *still* doesn't, and her collection of game pieces continues to grow to the point where he can't tell the difference between her and them. She's supposed to be the one moving them, not the one being moved by them.

He clicks his tongue in disappointment. Silly girl, breaking the boundaries she set up for herself. He will have to reteach her what she has always known: there is no place for people like them among the masses.

He drums his fingers on the desk, finishing the message by the light of a low candle. Tsunade, at least, will be glad to know the location of Hatake and his squad of brats, and perhaps Baki will stop badgering them now that his team has been located as well. Orochimaru will just have to spin it as incompetence on the part of the teacher, and highlight how it was her own skill that led to the discovery of the Suna team.

Due to restrictions on time and unsecured location, details of economic restructuring will be sparse, but overlaying plan should lead to re-stabilization of market by inducing controlled, manufactured supply of goods, he reads, noting her plan to artificially create a shortage of goods in order to keep up pricing and stoke demand. It's clever, and manipulative-creating hype about a relatively base product in order to drive up pricing-and he understands that it's crowd working at it's finest. He's glad to see she isn't lost to her madness completely.

Still...

Will discreetly return to base in Rice with Kiri delegation, withholding recently acquired allies in order to better distribute orders among ranks and ensure safe passage for genin teams to allied villages. Hesitant acceptance of Kirigakure's economic advances in interests of future productivity, despite subpar cognitive ability. Further details required for more conclusive plans, link will remain open for ensuing times-

He isn't pleased that she's associating with any of them at all. Two of them are highly dangerous, notorious criminals, and with what is going on, she cannot afford to lose anymore face with the nobility. The actions of her rogue group in Grass, and the rumors of action taking place elsewhere have accumulated to such a degree that she balances on a razor's edge as it is. He cannot placate *all* of the noble courts, and though he is sure the Rice daimyo is under his sway, the others remain only influenced by it.

He hums, formulating ideas in his head as he stands to inform his fellow Kage-and by default, Jiraiya as well-of her safe recovery, and their teams' whereabouts. What they need now is a positive spin in the eyes of both the nobles and the commoners, a distraction and alliance. She needs the safety of a good name, to reassert her place in the order of things. Actions like hers taken by a commoner are unacceptable, but with the backing of a good house and better blood, they become more palatable.

She also needs to be reminded of what happens to game pieces if she is so intent on surrounding herself with them and sinking to their level. Pieces are moved and played in order to suit the whims of the master, and if she wants to reclaim her past by surrounding herself with her old unit and reliving in her halcyon days, he'll remind her why she left them behind.

The arrangement of promising events with interested parties should remind her that if she wants to relive the past, she should acknowledge that she was born to be sold, and he isn't so fond to be above selling her if it proves more beneficial to him. If she wants to act like a child, to keep secrets like a peasant teenager and run around with a ruffian crowd, he'll punish her as any good parent would.

AN: So, as you can see, OTRATS is running like on a pretty strict linear schedule these past two chapters. We're going to see the next few days/ weeks pretty detailed out, because I'm trying to wrap up loose ends. It should be noted that this chapter takes place about three-four hours after the last, and tension is still very high. The next chapter will take place around 4-5 hours after this, and then the next is immediate, then a tiny time skip, then more up-close timing. The pacing is crucial for several reasons, but mostly, since Ryuishi escaped the Akatsuki SHIT HAS BEEN HAPPENING. IT'S A HURRICANE OF SHIT. SO MUCH OF IT.

That being said, Otrats may be reaching its peak. You may have thought that the climax was with the Akatsuki BUT YOU WERE WRONG.

A humble shout-out to my lurkers, favers, and followers. Even though you may not comment, you are there, and I cherish you.

Many great thanks to my reviewers, who take time out of their busy schedules to help remind me that people, indeed, read this. Ya'll keep me strong.

And may all the blessings and honors of the world shine down upon my chunin, my friend who I am honored to have. Thank you Enbi, you know what's up, and you know what for. (Check her out, and the authors on her profile. They are pretty fucking promising..)

In Which a Wall Goes Up

I do not own Naruto.

Ryuishi is on the warpath. She knows she is, she can feel her rage boiling just beneath her skin, the monster inside her trying its damndest to be let loose. Chakra curls on her fingertips, and she wants so dearly to crush things, to feel the sting of barely-dodged blades and the trickle of blood on her hands.

A different part of her-more distant, colder-views the world through heavily hooded eyes while her mindscape burns, and it tells her what she rejected all along: if she had been crueller, more controlling, none of this would have happened. She gave Hanako too much power, she knows that now. She should have kept a closer watch on the wandering tribe, should have never given them weapons or trained them to survive off the land like ghosts. Now they run wild, wreaking havoc and spreading fear.

How long? How long until the war spreads outside of the borders of Grass? How long until Ame snatches up its weak and fumbling neighbor? How long until Iwa swoops down, claiming even more land? How long until the nobles begin to bay for her blood, to howl about birthright like the spoiled children they are? How long until the tribe is shredded down, until the nobles turn on anyone who once claimed allegiance to her, whoever whispered her name in their darkest hour?

She can barely even think about how she's going to rectify the trade situation, all the numbers jumbling up inside her head. She's choking on air with how angry she is.

"Ryuishi-" Haku begins to say, but she raises her hand, and she can't tell if it's shaking in fear or loathing. Haku is fourteen, just fourteen,

and the others are so young. How long until they are dragged into the mess she has made, thrown into violence for her crimes?

"It's been *hours*," the boy tries again.

Briefly, she is surprised. After the beach incident, she lost herself in the whirlwind of preparation and replies, penning out an answer to Orochimaru as fast as she could. There's too much to compute, and she's half-hysterical with fury. Kakashi... Kakashi can take Team Seven and lead them back to safety with Tenzō. Gaara and his siblings can come with her until they reach Otogakure, and from there, she can appoint a squad to see them home. Zabuza and Haku, of course, are with her. Itachi and Kisame can camp out here for now-not that she sees Kisame letting her go off. Actually, she can't see any of them allowing it.

"Haku-" she growls before checking herself. She breathes in, leashes the monster. This isn't his fault, isn't anyone's fault but hers. "Is anybody dead?" she asks stonily, her words clipped. Short, to the point. That's good.

He shakes his head, and she returns to the map spread out over the bed and the pieces of paper strewn about. She needs a more comprehensive set of plans and backups.

Theoretically, Kumo could be a huge fucking problem, depending on how pissed they decide to get over a disgraced daimyo and a group of rogues half a continent away. Ideally, they won't, but in case they do, she needs to bottleneck forces in the Land of Frost, long before the open Land of Hot Water. The train systems and railways are good target points, because a lack of supplies should hit the secluded area pretty hard-

"Everybody is worried," Haku says, interrupting her thoughts and she shivers. They should be focusing on the bigger picture. Right now, a little bit of manic planning is alright. It might prevent disasters, and having backup plans is always useful.

Control, she thinks, biting her lip hard enough to taste iron. She needs control over the situation, over the tribe and the network. She needs to reward Kagami for her loyalty and show those who have betrayed it why they shouldn't cross her. If Hanako doesn't stop soon, Ryuishi isn't above tracking them herself. A little terrorism is forgivable, maybe. Probably. However, killing the daimyo is too much, and purposefully burning down way-points and attacking bases is going to far. Hanako is going to get them all killed.

Idly she digs her nails into her arm, using the pain to help her focus. She stares at the map, trying to figure out what pathways Hanako is using, and where, exactly she obtained the amounts of chemicals she did. True, it's not impossible to obtain the products through certain processes, but as far as she is aware, they haven't been invented in this world, or at least they aren't available to the public.

Dammit, it's been years, and there's all sorts of new shit these days, a byproduct of the higher education rates. It's not unthinkable that they re-engineered the methods. Son of a bitch, she should have seen this coming-

"Ryuishi," a voice intones, and she notes that it's Kisame. She feels a rush of fresh fury, white hot and so pure it takes her breath away. He kept her for three months, he took her meds away, and *she could tear out his damn **throat*** .

"Fuck off," she snaps, leaning over to jot down some more figures and plans.

If she moves some of the wandering clan gangs in River discreetly enough, they should be able to stop any activity from crossing over the border. Ame, obviously, can fend for itself, and the Land of Fire has more than enough forces to guard its border. In the event that Tsunade is pressured into joining or turns out to be a backstabbing bitch, she'll just have to-

"Ryuishi," says another voice, and this time it's Zabuza. She has enough time to look up and frown at him, because he should

understand. She has to fix this before it spreads any further.

Oh Vishnu, what about Kiri? She knows Mei, that beautiful force of nature, isn't going to Ootogakure to secure trade deals. If she wanted those alone, she wouldn't have requested Ryuishi specifically. Konoha was supposed to be her debut, and she was under the impression that it went fairly well, besides the kidnapping and all that.

Still, hopefully that's all Terumī wants to talk about. If she's under the impression that she can go back on the deal, or anything else, Ryuishi will show her what a bad idea it is. She can't afford another betrayal like Hanako's, and she'll fucking *make* Terumī listen, one way or another. She gave her those trade paths, and she can take them away. In short term, the loss of goods will be harmful, but more so to Kiri than Oto.

"You're bleeding," Zabuza tells her, and she bares her teeth at him, turning back down to jot down several merchants' names. Yamaguchi? Yamatake? Yama-fuck. *Fuck*. She needs to contain this, to control it.

Suna... Suna can suck a dick. She loves Gaara, but she isn't above handing Rasa his political ass on a platter. If he wants to start a ruckus over Gaara, she'll just let it slip exactly how much of his markets she controls. If Wind Country nobles want to start shit, she'll just hit them where it hurts. She likes her metal supplies, she does. The iron, copper, and tungsten are great, but she will flood the market with product if they try her. She'll fucking put so much metal out there it's worthless, and the supply of food and water will stop just as it started. She knows for certain that the new construction and businesses will shrivel up and die if she does that, and it still leaves the glass and silk markets-

"Ryuishi, stop," Kisame urges her, and she muffles a shriek, reaching out for the nearest object to hurl at the wall. He needs to shut up and stop talking. He can get his ass into gear and do something useful for once in his miserable life.

The nearest object turns out to be a book of market prices, and it sails sideways at the door instead of the intended wall. Haku yelps as he ducks, and it streaks past him, tumbling down the stairs.

Ryuishi swears. "Haku-fuck, I didn't mean-I'm so sorry," she apologizes, finally releasing her arm. The warm trickle that slides down it is negligible, as it the pang of soreness that heralds bruises.

"That's it," somebody decides, and next thing she knows, the floor is coming alive, and beams of wood snake out to grab her. She has a flash of panic as they wind around her wrists, but it's replaced by rage, and she twists hard enough dislodge herself, following through to shatter them in a flurry of strikes.

"Fix my floor, I have to apologize-" she babbles, stumbling forward again, her hair a mess.

Haku looks up from his place, and he watches her wide, slightly horrified eyes. She knows, she gets it, he was never supposed to see her like this. In a flash, her rage turns to sorrow, and she feels like weeping. She almost fucking hit him with a book. She was aiming for the wall, but how could she? She's a fucking monster, dear Buddha-

Shit. Oh *shit* . What was she thinking? If he can't dodge a book, how can he dodge the knives that will be coming? The kunai that rain down from the heavens, and the billowing fire? What about the torrent of raging water and the blood and shit, the popped intestines that spill out of body cavities, and the wide, glassy eyes...

"Haku, go," Zabuza orders, and she blinks away the vision, realizing she has frozen in place, caught up in the memory. Her heart flutters in her chest, and she feels like she needs to fight, like she needs to maim and tear.

The boy only hesitates once, and then he flees, scampering away with only a glance back. *That's good*, she thinks, relieved. He's fast, faster than her almost. He can dodge fine, she and Zabuza made

sure of that, and he just wasn't expecting it. He wasn't expecting the woman who was supposed to be his caretaker to fuck up that badly.

"Dammit," she hisses, pushing the palm of her hand into her eye. "Dammit, fuck." She pushes harder, because the sensation makes her focus on something, for once. Combined with the utter, savage need to tear something apart, she's very, very tempted to just keep pushing until it pops, until her eyes trickle down her face like fluid, following the blood trails down her arm-

Somebody steps closer, and she opens her eyes, dropping her hand away from her face. She needs to be in control, to fix things and regain the ground she's lost.

" *Don't*, " she snarls. "Go away, let me work."

"You aren't working," Zabuza returns heatedly, meeting her on an equal level. "You're maiming yourself and frightening the brats."

"Good," she says with contempt, and she's not even sure why. It just pours out of her, pushing past her lips and tumbling into the air.

"You don't mean that," Kakashi says lazily from the doorway. He's withdrawn into himself, waiting just behind the others, and she realizes that it was probably him who ordered Tenzō to restrain her. Tenzō, who she can see just behind Kakashi, staring in.

What the fuck do they think this is? A zoo?

"They're ninja now," she hisses. "They are going to see terrible things. They are going to *do* terrible things." And maybe, if they try their damndest, they might reach the level of disaster that she has.

"They're also people. You were the one who said that," Kakashi points out, and it feels like an accusation. Like a noose around her neck. She can see Zabuza nod along, because that was her party line, wasn't it? That they are all people. That they deserve to live.

She was wrong.

She was wrong, because her freedom, her western ideals, all her philosophy and effort, they just mean that there is more division, more lines between people. More lives to end. It only stops when she has full control, when she can make it stop.

She knows her experience isn't universal. She knows that it's never just two things, that there are layers and layers to life, subtle nuances that go to an extent she'll never understand. She understands that they are people, and shinobi too. That they can be happy and sad and a number of things, but she needs them to understand. She's fucked up, she's fucked up so bad. She may have squashed the nationalism in the butt, but the treaties and alliances are building up, the trade networks being monopolized, the random raiding and terrorism combined with the increased education and populations-

It's war from her old world. It's not petty skirmishes and front line clashing. It's not a warrior caste fighting a warrior caste. It's the fucking rise of industrialization and the spark that ignited WW2. It's the fucking Khan empire, the Mongols that made China run red with blood. It's the War of Three Kingdoms, with great tacticians every which way, and the peasantry worked to death. It's the Spanish Inquisition, the motherfucking Crusades. Her effort to change things and end wars did nothing but evolve them. She took all the greatest hits from her old world's wars and brought them together for an entirely new clusterfuck.

"You need to understand," she says. "I need to, I need-"

"I'm coming in," Zabuza announces, and the others nod. She panics, because they can't take her away now. They can't make her stop, a little self-destructive behaviour is nothing in the face of what she has done. She needs to show them, to let them know.

Her hands rise up, and they all seem to register that besides being dangerous to herself, she's dangerous to others as well. There is a

frantic scramble as she flashes through hand seals, driven by some mad purpose, desperate and hysterical, but they jostle one another in their effort to stop her. They aren't a cohesive unit, but a mismatched group of renegades. Nobody trusts each other to take the lead, and in their struggle to do the same thing at once without coordination, they are caught.

But just as she's shaping her chakra, just as the pure desperation and fury courses through her, it's slammed down. She feels herself choke at the suddenness, feels something like a finger jabbing in the base of her skull. It hurts like a motherfucker.

There's something trickling out of her eyes, warm and hot, stinging like a bitch and making it hard to see. It feels suddenly like her eyes are swollen, far too big for her head, and there is that wall, a cage around her panic that muffles her fury and makes her kinda dizzy.

She has enough sense to look at her hands and be absolutely appalled by her what she did before it feels like somebody is trying to drop kick their way out of her face through her skull.

Zabuza finally squeezes through, and there is a rush of amusement at the thought of all these men squirming their asses through her door like dancers at a nightclub. She feels a hysterical entertainment that, certainly, in no way, belongs to her.

What the gracious ever-loving *fuck* ?

"Hatake!" bites out Zabuza, slapping her hands apart and cupping her face in his palms. He feels warm, and he's staring down at her with alarm.

"Not me, not anything I've ever seen," Kakashi says in a rush, swooping around to stare at her face. She's glad they, at least, are around the same height, and he doesn't tower over her like Zabuza.

"ITACHI," Kisame bellows, the embodiment of somebody who towers over her. The sound of his voice makes her skull pound, and she's

busy trying to figure out what the fresh hell is going on inside her grey matter. She lick her lips and tastes fresh blood, not from her earlier self destructive actions, but from where it is leaking down her face.

Her eyes are bleeding.

"Please tell me you didn't somehow manage to obtain a rare, previously unheard-of doujutsu that looks exactly like your eyes, but also causes extreme strain," Kakashi frets, placing his hands over Zabuza's to turn her head towards him. That makes four hands in total on her face, or, maybe it's still two? Technically, Kakashi is cupping Zabuza's hands, which is actually hilarious.

"I was gonna genjutsu you," she admits, and the words feel weird on her tongue. She understands why she was going to, and the emotions are still there, but muffled, caged.

"I think there's something wrong with my head," she adds after a moment.

"Understatement," Zabuza grunts, still looking at her eyes like he has any clue what to do.

Somehow, at some point, Itachi has come upstairs, and it doesn't go unnoticed by her that there are curious eyes peering around her doorway, trying to look in.

Tenzō, at least, has the good grace to keep any children from entering the room, and he stands guard while Itachi slips past. Still she feels ashamed, and she purposefully hides her body behind the mass of grown ass men hovering around her bleeding face.

The eldest Uchiha takes one look at her eyes, and he goes still, examining them from where he has somehow ghosted his way between everybody, and he calmly looks to Zabuza for permission. The swordsman, accepting that he knows jack shit about this,

removes his hands and steps away. His actions are mirrored by Kakashi, and Itachi steps in to get a closer look.

"How many times has this happened?" he questions her, and she screws up her face, because to her knowledge, this is the first.

"Never?" she says dubiously, still feeling that distant calm. "This is the first time?"

Kisame shakes his head. "No, right before we left, you went in the room with the masked man, and when I came in, you were like this, only worse," he reminds her, but... she-she only kinda remembers some of the shit that went down. It's super hazy, and also? She's not sure what was real, and what she fucking hallucinated.

Her head smarts something fierce, and she cannot tell for the life of her why she feels so unsettled. She keeps rejecting that presence, shoving it further and further away, and she can literally feel the pain levels drop as it flees.

"It's Mangekyō overuse," Itachi diagnoses. "The strain, the swelling, the hemorrhaging tissue. The best that can be done is rest. Perhaps some cold compresses."

"That's your answer?" Kakashi sounds bewildered. "Her eyes are bleeding and you think she needs to slap some ice packs on it and sleep?"

"Is she an Uchiha?" comes Sasuke's angry voice from the door. If she is, things will make more sense in a way, and even less in another.

"No," says just about every adult, because for all she may be a genjutsu user showing serious signs of strain, never, in her life, has she come anywhere near the amount of collected calm that Uchiha pride themselves on.

"She better not be," mumbles Naruto, and the comment is followed by a yelp of pain.

"Who made her eyes bleed?" Gaara asks, who may not be able to see her, but is alarmed nonetheless by the adult's words. He'll kill the one who dared so much to lay a finger on her.

"Shush up," the distant, familiar voice of Ryuishi comes, muffled by the crowd. "All of you, start packing."

"You need rest," Itachi says disapprovingly.

"I need my doctor," she counters, thankful for the barrier between herself and her rage. "I need to take care of my village and my people. I need to get back to work."

"You're not ready," Kakashi protests, and this time, she doesn't answer. She just blinks the blood out of her eyes and stares up at Zabuza. The swordsman is disgruntled and angry, but he doesn't fight her, not on this. If anybody can help her, it's the man who fixed her once before, and his convenient obsession with the doujutsu is nothing short of fortuitous right now.

Besides, he knows her, knows that if trying to chain her down and stop her will only backfire. The more she is restrained, the more she feels the needs to run, and he cannot-will not-let her out of his sights again. Not when he just spent three months without her, forcing himself to ignore the fact that she may have been dead.

"We'll go," he acquiesces, and she relaxes a little, closing her eyes in relief. "Two days," he follows up, because she needs that at least. Two days of rest. Everybody could use it.

"Alright," she agrees distantly, and something curls in his gut. Two days, and he can figure things out, send the Leaf back to Konoha and set rules down for the others.

And maybe, by the time they start traveling again, he won't have to sleep in the confines of his bed alone.

Kakashi doesn't like this plan. He doesn't like it one bit. Oh, he can see the sense in it. He knows it's what needs to be done, but he hates it in a way that is very, very familiar.

He's angry at Ryuishi, he won't deny it. The fact that she has been hiding knowledge that directly pertains to him and his personal history is a huge blow. The fact that she is here, willingly associating with somebody who tortured her not a month ago, also enrages him. This, partnered with the mounting evidence that she is still unsteady but refuses to just take a break makes him seethe.

Now, on top of everything else, she's asking him to leave.

"Take the kids and go. It's not safe, and it's about to get even more dangerous. Your team is young still, and they need the safety of the village," she says sternly, fiddling with the chains of her weapon. It doesn't escape his notice that she hasn't let it go since she got it back, not even in the bathroom.

"Last night you were telling me how they were ninja now," he drawls, eyeing Kisame, who keeps glaring at him through the bay window. He's apparently been exiled to inside the house while the adults talk on the porch, and the children play outside on the beach.

"Tell me I'm wrong Hatake," she returns coldly. She sounds hard, like she's lost something important. It's the kind of voice that Orochimaru has when he isn't playing games, and Kakashi hates it. "Tell me you want to bring your genin team to an unknown hidden village ruled by somebody who has an unhealthy interest in the Sharingan. Tell me you want Naruto, a jinchuuriki, anywhere near this mess. Tell me you think Sakura should be surrounded by a population of hardened sex workers and opportunistic merchants."

He scowls as he looks at her, because he know what his responsibilities are. He knows what his best option is, and that the safety of his team comes first.

"You're asking me to leave you with two dangerous, S-ranked criminals when you aren't at your best. You want me to abandon you to this mess with only Momochi as back-up," he reiterates slowly, as if she doesn't understand what she's asking him.

"I'm asking you to make a tactical decision. One foreign leader over your team, and the value of protecting the foreign leader has gone down. You know what is more important," she sighs, and she won't even look at him. He wants to crush the banister she's leaning over and snatch the weapon out of her hand. He wants to make her look, to pay attention.

"You know it's not that simple, Ryuishi," he says lowly, leaning closer. He lowers his volume, hoping she catches the inflection. "You're more than just a foreign leader, and you are asking me to abandon you in a dangerous situation. You know Naruto cares about you. You know my whole team does.... You know I do." The last part is mumbled, almost embarrassed, but he still says it.

She looks at him for the corner of her eyes, but only for the briefest of seconds before her gaze slides back to look at the beach. Naruto body checks Gaara before a wave of sand crumples over them both, causing an outcry among the teams. They seem to be recovering from their journey just in time to make another.

For a moment, there is only the sound of the breeze coming off the sea, the steady waves, and the exuberant noises made by the children.

"I hear you figured out my heart riddle," she states in a conversational tone.

"It's wasn't hard. I'll admit I didn't realize you had a soft spot for kids until recently, but now it's obvious," he deadpans.

"It's not just the kids," she says after a long moment, and he holds his breath, because he doesn't know how to take that statement. Not when she glances down, as if holding onto one more secret.

"You-" he starts, but she cuts him off.

"I'm done playing games, Kakashi. You take Naruto, Sasuke, Sakura, and Tenzō, and you keep them far away from me. I'm sick, you know I'm sick, and they don't need to be around me. As soon as I get to Otogakure, I'm sending the Suna team back as well," she says.

"You're isolating yourself," he realizes, and then scowls. "That's stupid, that's the exact opposite-"

"I am cleaning up the mess I made," she interrupts, and he sees that temper flare. It's a burst of sparks in her careful cold, a lick of heat that strains against her control.

She breathes in, and he sees her hunt down that emotion, sees her exterminate it from herself. He's always considered her playful and emotional, mischievous and flowing. He never thought there would come a day where she detached herself from her feelings, never thought the day would come where he could say she became distant from it all.

She lets the breath out in a sigh, and she closes her eyes to gather herself.

"What are you planning?" he asks, reaching out to grab her forearm, careful of her bruises. Her muscles are loose, and he knows that's somehow not a good sign.

"You know, when we first met, I was lost and confused. I was desperate and hungry, and I will never be able to thank you enough for being there. For helping me find pieces I'd thought I'd lost forever," she says in lieu of a response, and then she turns to him. Despite the sunshine and surf, he sees darkness in her eyes.

"You're being stupid." This sounds ominous, and he doesn't like it. "I'm not going to abandon you. I'll take them back, and then when they are safe, we can figure it out. I'm still angry, and we have to talk about that."

"You're a grown man, and I won't make your choices for you. Just keep your team safe," she tells him, and she moves close, winding her free hand in his hair. The other, he notices, rests against the banister, fingers woven with steel.

Then his heart skips a beat, because she leans up on her tiptoes and draws his head down. He feels her nudge his hitai-ite protector from his forehead, and then she's pressing her cold lips between his brows.

He squeezes her forearm, and closes his eyes. He's angry, and he's confused. Nothing makes sense anymore. She isn't asking him to keep secrets. She's not trying to maintain her sway or defend her credibility. She's...

He doesn't know.

She mouths something against his skin, and though he can't hear it over the cry of a gull, he can feel the rush of surprise in his veins as her recognizes the shape of the words that her lips form as they move against him. His eyes widen as she slides back down, pulling out of his grasp, leaving only a trace amount of coolness there.

He's frozen, and she walks back inside like the moment never happened, as cold and in control as she was moments ago. For a moment he thinks he imagined it, but when he looks through the bay window, he sees Hoshigaki staring at him with a veiled expression, and Momochi eating a bowl of rice behind him, watching the whole thing like he's bored in a theater.

He takes a moment to wonder if he's been indoctrinated in some sort of secret society before embarrassment floods him and he yanks down his headband, feeling defensive. He doesn't trust Hoshigaki,

and Momochi may have some leeway, but not a lot. Also, he's still angry at her. If she thinks for a single second that three words are going to save her from a week long lecture, she's wrong.

... He just doesn't want to have to use that type of language in front of his genin team.

"No!" Naruto protests, stomping his foot on the ground. He's sporting a nice tan from the beach, and Sakura stands behind him, sun-kissed and stubborn. Sasuke, however, sports a fresh sunburn across his nose and shoulders, and looks hilarious. Itachi had to actually leave the room.

Actually, Itachi has been avoiding his brother like the plague. The two Uchiha have been doing this strange thing where it seems like they can't exist within eyesight of each other.

"It's not a choice," Kakashi mutters under his breath, feeling outnumbered. He doesn't know why all of these children have banded together, but he doesn't like it. From a strictly tactical point of view, the only ones being smart about all this are the older siblings on the Suna team. While not obvious in their distaste, they are closed off. They seem to recognize that they are in a precarious situation. It shouldn't be hard to miss, what, with all the criminals running around, but his team is oblivious to that.

It does not bode well for Team Seven's character-judging capabilities.

"We just got here, and we aren't leaving nee-san alone with a bunch of weirdoes!" Naruto declares loudly. Kakashi takes a petty pleasure in the fact the boy said it loud enough to echo through the house. He hopes everyone can hear that, said weirdoes and Ryuishi included.

"Momochi-san and Haku-kun will be with her," Tenzo placates. Reliable, capable Tenzō. Where would Kakashi be without his kōhai?

"Not enough. I don't trust that blue guy, and Sasuke's-" Here, Naruto is cut off by a firm strike to the spine, delivered by said teammate. He yelps, but the unspoken message is sent regardless. "-I don't trust that blue guy," Naruto grumbles, rubbing his back. "And the man with the ponytail who has no affiliation to Sasuke or the Uchiha name."

Ah, Kakashi thinks, catching on. Sasuke has gone the route of disownment and is severing all ties to his brother. Makes sense, considering. He can't condemn him, he can't dishonor his dead family, and he can't gain their honor back because Danzō is already dead. His only option is disownment, possibly until Sasuke feels ready for something else, or Itachi reclaims his place by some grand feat.

Considering that Itachi boldly admitted to killing their parents, Kakashi thinks it would have to be one hell of a feat.

"Alright," Kakashi agrees amicably. "Don't trust them. They aren't going with her either. Tomorrow she leaves at the same time we do, and they stay here."

Kakashi receives several skeptical glances at this, and he echoes the unspoken thoughts. Given the way that Hoshigaki has trailed her, there is a slim chance he's just going to let her walk into Oto without him. However, he's not going to acknowledge that out loud.

"Gaara and his siblings will be joining her to Oto, before they go back to Suna," Tenzō says, and here Naruto looks a bit considering, sharing careful glances with the redheaded boy. There is a silent communication taking place between them all that the adults are not privy to.

Maybe Ryuishi has a point. Constant exposure to her is bad for developing minds. He's literally watching them scheme.

"Alright," Sakura says hesitantly. "But why do we have to sign a contract?"

"You don't *have* to," Sasuke sniffs.

Temari snorts disbelievingly, eyeing the paper in her hand. As the only one who apprenticed under an elder, she has the experience here, but this contract is a piece of work. She doesn't like Watanabe, feels betrayed by the woman and completely unsafe around her companions, but she'll admit. The woman knows her legalese.

"No, but if you don't, her representatives will take you to the noble courts. Because of our ninja status, we are legally considered adults in the service of a nation, and this whole situation is considered S-rank secret in Oto and Konoha. Your Hokage, it seems, has already signed this for your team, and counts as a binding legal representative. The Kazekage doesn't know, but there is interesting and threatening language here about trade rights and alliances. She *really* doesn't want people to know about this house or her secret harem of super powerful shinobi." Temari scoffs derisively.

"Temari," Gaara scolds.

"No, Gaara, she's *threatening* us by food and water trade. She's willing to keep a whole country in need in order to sate her desire to play around with mass-murdering psychopaths. I'm not okay with this," she snaps back, reading further on forfeits and sub-clause loopholes.

"The other option was murder," a voice chimes in from the doorway, and the Suna kunoichi freezes. Her brothers shift, viewing the newcomer with distrust.

"Momochi," Kakashi sighs.

"Hatake," the swordsman acknowledges, leaning against the doorframe.

"I don't think that sort of thing is going to help," Kakashi states passively, viewing the other man with wary eyes.

"No, I think it's exactly what needs to be said. They can pen their names and press a bloody thumbprint to the paper, or I can do it the way it used to be done," he states calmly.

"You can't," Sasuke argues. "She wouldn't-"

Zabuza cuts him off with a glare, and the room goes quiet. Kakashi silently slides in front of his team, because he may be calm about delivering the lines, but Momochi is stating solid facts. He is not soft for all of the children the way Ryuishi is, and he might respect her wishes, but he also would not hesitate to protect the safety of his conceived group first and foremost.

"You," Momochi says slowly, "do not want to push. If signing a contract is beyond you, then you stay here, or you go home without a tongue and hands."

"Careful," Kakashi warns in a low voice, but Zabuza just eyes him lazily, unperturbed.

"Ryuu-nee would kick your ass, dattebayo," Naruto bites out, hackles raised.

" *Ryuu-nee*, " Zabuza echoes calmly, "remained even after I killed our entire academy class. Ryu-nee fought beside me in a war, where we both did things that would make you cry. Ryu-nee waited years for me and has been beside me for even longer. Ryu-nee was just returned to me after months of abduction and imprisonment. I'm not about to let that be endangered by a bunch of brats and a lenient duo of Konoha jounin."

Kakashi glares at him, but Sakura moves to skim the contract beside Temari. Personally, she knows she really doesn't have to sign it considering the Hokage already did, but it's not like she would tell anyway. Also, there's a sub-clause in here about using the house as a secure waypoint when necessary, and Sakura likes the idea of having a beach house to crash in.

"What is wrong with you people?" Kankuro whispers after a second, looking appalled.

"We're ninja now," Sakura points out, taking a pen from a nearby shelf and jotting her name. The next part stings a bit more, but she slices the back of her hand, dips a thumb in it, and presses her digit to the paper regardless. "It's like a summoning contract, only for secrecy. Not too weird." She gives a small shrug.

"He just threatened to cut out our tongues," Sasuke reminds her, bristling.

"Don't let him intimidate you," Kakashi admonishes, and Sakura huffs in amusement under her breath.

"It's easier to do it this way, Kakashi-sensei. Zabuza-san has a point. It makes sense to sign us to secrecy if he can't eliminate us outright. I have no grudge against common sense," she informs her teacher nonchalantly.

Once again, Kakashi has serious concerns over the sterile quality of Sakura's morals.

"Smart girl," Zabuza says appreciatively, nodding his head in approval. It seems that the pink one has some modicum of sense.

Kankuro grits his teeth, but he takes the proffered pen and blade, feeling like he's joining some sort of cult. The more he learns about this particular brand of crazy, the more he wants to distance himself from the whole group. Once he and his siblings are out of here, he's gonna attempt to never come back. He wants nothing to do with all of these people.

"I'm adding addendums," Temari grits out, watching her brothers. The swordsman just grunts, and she cannot *wait* to get her brothers away from these dangerous criminals.

"I thought you were above this," Kakashi accuses the other man lowly, and he simply shrugs his shoulders, observing everyone sign the piece of paper granted to her by Orochimaru.

"I meant what I said, Hatake. They threatened my home and the people in it," Momochi informs him, making pointed eye contact. "She might like them, might have a soft spot for them, but at the end of it all, she's already made her choices, and her loyalties are clear."

Kakashi holds his tongue, but he really doesn't agree.

AN: So, we are approaching the final arc of OTRATS (It's still not romance oriented. Just like, eros spritzed). It's actually probably one of the longest arcs and In this chapter, we see that Ryuishi needs to be punched in the face with the knowledge that there is someone else in her head (besides the others, obviously). We also see Zabuza is who she trusts, and we see that Zabuza is over killing kids to protect what her has. Also, Kakashi joins the ranks, getting the same treatment the unit got before she left Kiri, and the sand sibs are pissed. Temari went to court.

Thank you to my lurkers, my favoriters and followers. A big shout out to my reviewers who keep me strong and have it going on.

Thank you to my beta Enbi, who has stuck with me from the start, and helped develop this fic so much. IDK where I would be without them.

Also; I'm not a god, so, if you see gaping problem not being fixed, let me know. But, like, gently.

In Which Relationships are Ambiguous

I do not own Naruto.

Something is wrong inside her head.

While that statement should be fairly fucking obvious to even the most casual observer, she's not talking about the sudden withdrawal and reinstatement of her medication. The pieces of her psyche are back together but not the same as before, not broken shards healed back together with almost invisible welds, but rather something else.

There's a wall. A clear one through which she can examine all the bits and parts, but they remain muffled. It's not the same as it was, because she feels colder, more distant, and there is a constant ache at the base of her skull. It's a pounding pain, which light and sound cause to flare up in distracting heights.

She doesn't have time for it. She has too many troubles as is, and she refuses to let anymore crop up and distract her. She knows she didn't put the wall up, not completely, but she *is* reinforcing it, fixing the cracks and weaknesses. She doesn't want to be ruled by feelings, doesn't want the rampant emotions inside of her to be any more than occasional pangs that rear their heads now and then.

It's almost better, in a way. Or, rather, not better, but easier, because she suddenly doesn't care so much. She can accept the facts as they come, regardless of her personal desires. She's removed from her personal ties, separated from herself. There is no tension lingering between her and Kisame if she refuses to acknowledge it. There is no unnameable want for Zabuza as company, or the desire to make Kakashi less angry with her.

She just *is* -for a little while-and there is only her actions.

She hefts her bag up on her shoulder and kisses Team Seven goodbye, all the while telling them it is not so. She plants her lips on their foreheads, because that's what she did in the past, and it makes sense to continue it in the future. Naruto looks upset, and Sasuke is something she can't place, but Sakura smiles and titters, promising to train hard.

Kakashi and Tenzō don't speak, they just nod, and then they leave. She could drag it out, use pointed, flowery words, but it doesn't need to be said. One team is gone, one more thing out of her poisonous grasp.

Looking back to the Suna team, and Zabuza and Haku, she knows logically that things will be easier to deal with now. That if she wanted, before they left, she could talk things out with Gaara, tell his siblings that they are right in their distrust of her. Confirm suspicions and drive a wedge between them and her.

Ryuishi doesn't. The energy to speak seems to have left her. She can't think of the right words to say, the correct moves to make. She doesn't even want to try. So she moves on, and turns one last time to see Kisame staring at her from the porch with a pointed glare. She has no doubt he won't listen to her request, but her control over the people surrounding her is lost. She didn't hold the reigns tight enough, and now she is paying for it.

She turns back, feels the tingle underneath her skin that begs her to move, and she listens to it, starting her arduous pace, hoping to cut down a week's journey into several days.

There is something unquestionably pure once the initial struggle has passed. It's been too long since she has moved her body completely in control of her limbs, pushing towards a clear destination instead of exercising to distract herself. In the Akatsuki cell, she moved her body to the point of exhaustion to tire out her mind. The journey to her house is hazy in her mind at best, weary and endless, but filled with spurts of delusion and hallucination.

This travel is different, though. She forces herself to find the right pace, the rhythm she can keep for days, and she holds it. She revels in the fresh sheen of sweat beginning on her brow and the burn in her calves. She's tumbling over the land, dodging around obstacles and flowing onward, smooth and steady. For a little while, she forgets her entourage, her troubles and worries. There is only the struggle for breath, the strain of movement, and her heavy bag on her back.

Then, behind her, Kankuro yelps as he falters in his steps.

At first, Ryuishi doesn't even register it. She keeps speeding onward, but then there is a trickle of sand around her stomach, and when she follows it with her eyes, Gaara is standing over his brother while Temari leans down to look at his ankle.

They look ragged. There is sweat soaking through their clothes, and they are still panting for breath. She knows that she should feel upset at their state, but instead, she is mildly irritated that they couldn't keep pace. It's only been a few hours.

A glance over tells her that even Haku looks winded, but Zabuza, at least, seems fine. He's staring at her though. She can feel the weight of judgement in his gaze, but she doesn't turn away from it.

"Haku, fix the ankle. We'll rest for ten, and then I'll take point," Zabuza announces, and she doesn't so much as flinch. If he wants to take over, that's fine. Apparently, she's been doing a shit job at it, so maybe he can do better.

She feels a pinch in the base of her skull, something like wry amusement washing through her before retreating back into the bubble. It leaves her with a faint feeling of nausea, and the unshakable feeling that nothing is right.

She keeps quiet, and she deals with it.

It's mildly annoying that the pace becomes much, much slower than it was before. They barely even make it past the border before sunset, and then only a little farther in the Land of Rivers before the Suna team starts whispering about camp. Even Haku joins in, which is good for camaraderie, but bad for her temper.

Worse is the way Zabuzza caters to them, allowing for camp after a measly twelve hours of travel. It's nothing compared to what they usually do, what she feels desperate for, and her annoyance peaks at the same time her headache does.

Ryuishi is appreciative that the others, at least, seem to read this off of her. Even Haku and Gaara are wary, and she knows she is at fault-that ideally, they should never be cautious of her. She doesn't go out of her way to soothe them, though, she just reins herself in enough to cook up a meal for them all with some of her pack's supplies. It's not much, just rice and vegetables with egg, a bastardized version of bibimbap, but the younger children dig in with fervor, as if they hadn't had a huge breakfast this morning.

It doesn't take long for them to finish their nightly ablutions, and though she is frustrated with the trail some of them leave-bedrolls leave imprints on this type of ground-she decides to hold her tongue and keep her senses open as they drift off, one by one.

It goes unspoken that they will be allowed to sleep while she takes watch. It appears, though, that perching up in a tree and keeping an eye (or in her case, ears and a nose) out is not an option tonight-at least, not alone. So she watches Zabuzza make his way over to her, steps silent and steady. Not one of the children so much as stirs as he picks his way through them, his judging eyes locked onto her. She can't see them in the dark, but she can feel the weight of his look on her skin, prickling the back of her neck.

He doesn't say anything as he closes in on her where she leans against the trunk of the spindly tree she was planning to ascend, and she reciprocates, her face blank and body forcibly relaxed. He's been watching her from a distance the entire trip, and even before.

Once he came back home, it's like he was her personal ghost, shadowing her steps and observing her interactions. They haven't really had any time to talk since her abduction and the big clusterfuck of a reunion. It would make sense that he wants to say something, just the two of them. After all, it's been a hard three months for them both.

But she should probably know better than that by now, because Zabuza's never been a talker.

Instead, he comes up to her, closer than normal, and he takes a moment to just stare at her in silence. She can feel the muggy heat radiating off of him, mingling with the humid night, and after a beat, he roughly places his hands on her shoulder, jerks her away from the tree trunk, and closes his arms around her like a cage. Somewhere between having her cheek pressed against a sweaty chest and feeling his fingers spread across her back, she forgets how to breathe. Or maybe it's his python arms strangling the breath out of her.

He still doesn't say anything, and she doesn't feel like she should either. There is only the ambient sounds of the jungle around them, and the sound of his steady beating heart to fill her ears accompanied by the soft whoosh of his breath as it goes in and out. It's not comfortable, exactly, because the climate is warm and Zabuza is damp and gross. Her head still hurts, and she feels kinda dead inside, both literally and metaphorically, but-but...

But Zabuza smells like weapons oil and home, in the way a building never can. He reminds her of fog-filled streets and a second youth, of safety and danger all at once, of every mistake and triumph. He is steady and unrelenting, an anchor when she's lost. His hands are bigger now, and he is a giant compared to the scrawny brat she knew, but it's Zabuza. Zabuza who has been by her side more often than not. Zabuza who has seen her ugly and torn apart, who knows her without words and speech.

Inside, she knows that things are changing in a big way. The person she was is not the person she is, and not the person she will be. She can feel a distance inside her, a gap that is growing in preparation for the things she will have to do. It's not the Void, but it is an emptiness, a darkness that she won't turn away from anymore.

It's comforting to know that Zabuza isn't stagnant either. The little boy she knew is not the man holding her, and he's not who he will be either, but somehow, in this crazy mess, they still work.

She lets out a sigh against his chest, and her hand crawls up to rest against his pectoral, fingers spread out on his skin. If she closes her eyes, she can almost imagine his core, the ember that makes him, floating just out of reach.

It's okay, though. She doesn't need to hold his soul in the palm of her hands and cradle it close. Not when there are ribbons, vibrant red and white, and gleaming chains of steel, that bind her heart to him.

She leans against him, and he lets his hold slip just the slightest bit, enough to free up one of his arms and raise his hand. It slides upward and tangles with hers, resting between them like an oath.

There are a thousand words that go unsaid that night, one hundred sentences they never say out loud, but there is peace. If only for a moment.

In the last decade and a half, the Land of Rice has become something almost unrecognizable from what it once was. Thirty years ago, it was known for its rural scenery, small, clan-ish towns, and little else.

Plainly speaking, it doesn't have the most desirable geography. To the northwest there is only untamed wilderness, thick forests that house ancient trees and strange wonders, a country-sized piece of land that goes unnamed. To the southeast, there once was Yugakure, a mediocre ninja village, but now the Land of Hot Water is

a tourist attraction for nobles and other elites. True, it shares a border with Konoha, but so do many countries, and it means little in the span of things.

For some it was farmland, home of the poor, with few natural resources beside fertile soil. But to Orochimaru and Ryuishi, it was a gem, unpolished and full of potential. Oh, it's still a work in progress, ever growing under their care, but it has come leaps and bounds from where it was.

Ryuishi started with the farmland itself. She took terraced rice fields and stone-age techniques and made them into something that bordered amazing, diversifying the crops and pushing yield far beyond what anyone could imagine without industrialisation. What used to be a subsistence farming with little trade became the staple of several countries' dinner plates. While Orochimaru worked his way into the courts and assembled forces from the exiled and wandering clans of the country, she buckled down and instituted labor forces to create roads instead of footpaths, and helped dig canals from the rivers that would allow for faster, easier travel.

The small coastline they did have wasn't warm enough for tourism, and it was more muddy and brown than cold navy blue because of the rivers that fed into it, but she did what she could to begin a small fleet of trading ships that could bear spices and fruit from Waterfall to Lightning Country's ports without the danger of damage from Frost's climates. She's also proud to say that the fruits and spices that didn't make it were shuffled into the budding distilleries that dotted that country, and she was slowly working her way towards re-inventing rum. Call it a pet project of hers.

The population boom was kind of self-explanatory after Orochimaru helped her institute better healthcare, and they didn't struggle to keep up with the numbers quite yet, but she won't lie and say that immigration wasn't a problem. The thing is, the seed population couldn't keep up with the demand for labor just yet. No doubt, in time it would, but that would be when the newborns and toddlers grew up. So the new industry and higher quality of life drew people in swaths,

and the Land of Rice should have welcomed them, but this was not a world where everyone could be trusted.

Among the droves of civilians looking to assist in construction or trade, there were foreign ninja waiting to sneak in to gather intel and sabotage their hard-won economic success. Which is why Ryuishi was forced to pull some techniques from her past life and give them up to Orochimaru and his forces. Hers alone would never be enough.

Squadron specialization wasn't unheard of in this world. After all, there were combat teams, like the Kiri no Kaijū, tracking teams, like what Konoha specialized in, and even sub-categories like ANBU, which specialized in intelligence and assassination. However, there wasn't ever a sort of border guard like Rice had ended up implementing. There were patrol routes and teams that switched in and out in other countries, but Ryuishi recalled another structure entirely. There were memories of the DMZ in Korea, and watermarked papers and ID's. Bureaucracy of alarming intricacy, and synergy of incredibly complexity.

She won't lie. There are almost fascist rules in place. Random patrols can, and will, stop whoever they wish to check papers. They have very special teams assigned to dealing with threats, and the results are not pretty. Lying about cargo can result in exorbitant fines, or incredibly hard labor.

And yes, she's awful and terrible, but prisons remain a fact of life and sentences need to be served. She doesn't like locking fucking ninja away. Ninja prison is an oxymoron. So those prosecuted have a variety of punishments, including hard labor. Orochimaru was all for outright death in most cases. She did what she could with what she had, and she can at least say that the civilians have a loose judicial system in place.

In the end, what was instituted was a triplicate set of bands going in concentric circles, one just near the border, one a half of the way in, and one right before Otogakure proper. The bands are connected by

roads and canals that have stationed ninja along set points. There was talk about building walls along the haloes between her and Orochimaru, but those were details for another time.

Also, there were so many patrols. Not just ninja, but civilian, and the middling police force that was just budding, which didn't really fit in either category.

She hears it's hard to sneak in through the canals when the Hōzuki hide within them, and harder still to get past the Yuki clan's surveillance mirrors. The Fuma wire users Orochimaru gathered were thorough as hell in searches, and she swears that the only reason more people don't get by them is because they have taken the mantle of smuggling themselves. Letting others sneak goods in is bad business, and she trusts that they know any ninja they ever let through would be detrimental to them as well.

The Kaguya clan, who seemed to have learned from their past, was kinda strict on the whole hierarchy thing, and did good on discouraging power grabs. They also seemed keen on the whole master/retainer thing, which makes her super uncomfortable, but she'll deal with that when their crazy bone weapons aren't a warning of what happens to corrupt officials who try to grab power by sacrificing those in their service.

Ryuishi is idly wondering if the second ring guard is a Shiin or Fuma, coldly watching them examine her papers and ignoring the way they eye the snake summons curling around her torso. Orochimaru is taking no chances with her identity, and though it seems a bit like overkill, the serpent has been her constant companion since she sent word she was close.

She's ignorant to the way the Suna team is ogling their surroundings, enraptured by the scenery around them, and the way Haku is quietly singling out certain caravans and wagons, pointing out the goods inside. Temari in particular tries to hold back her bitter awe.

The Land of Rice has become notoriously hard to infiltrate, and she's attempting to stow away information to reveal, but she keeps getting distracted. The low valley around them stretches for kilometers, filled with lush pastures and ripe green crops. Workers poke above the produce, wearing Sugegasa to protect themselves from the sun, and all around them, there is life. It is everything that Wind Country is not, from the glittering terraced rice paddies on the distant hillsides, to the lively crowds of merchants waiting in line for checks. Even the ninja wandering around them seem more plentiful, wary eyes holding some sort of proud glow.

This is what Risa-no, *Watanabe* -has been hoarding. All this life she could have shared and she stored it inside the borders of her little country. It makes her dislike the woman just a bit more, because she's a vagabond and criminal. She doesn't deserve this kind of wealth, not after what she has done.

In another life, this could have been Suna. It would be different, less foreign and strange, but it's what could have been. Temari realizes that there have been overtures made, goods sent for cut prices, but looking around, she feels like they are petty gestures.

Watanabe lives in Wind Country. She should have made it her home, made it into this, not given her knowledge away to some backwater little plot of land.

The patrol guards seem to realize who it is they are speaking with, and their boat is allowed to move through. The snake around Watanabe's shoulders and neck seems to spur them on a little faster, and after a second, the vessel lurches through the canal towards the next destination. Temari frowns as she looks into the murky brown water, noticing the long shadow of a curious eel a few feet below. Even the canals have fish in them.

(If asked, Haku would have kindly informed the kunoichi that the eels were stocked in the canals, alongside some catfish and carp species, to keep down on waste and ensure a ready protein source in times of need. Theoretically, he could go into symbology as well,

but Temari never opens her mouth, and Haku sticks close to Gaara and Kankuro, huddling around the bow of the raft, exchanging conversation.)

Two days later, and Temari is sick of the road. There are too many children everywhere, all screaming and loud. There is none of the conservative attitude of her home, and everybody seems to be going on about something. Her only consolation is that she's noticed the pinching around Watanabe's eyes, as if she too is fighting off a headache.

Thankfully, their destination is only one day of travel more, and they will finally get off this stinking boat. Then Otogakure proper is three hours away from the canals by wagon, four by foot, and one at breakneck ninja speed. True, Watanabe and her pack may not consider it that fast, but it is.

The city is seated atop one of the rolling hills, a river cutting through it that the barges cannot go up due to the current, and the outer walls are almost negligible. Almost, because there are so many, more artistic than practical, but Temari doesn't miss the ninja in the tapered towers, or the gangs roaming the hillside. Its architecture is strange to her, all angles and curves, a mixture of Konogakure's squares, Suna's domes, and tapered points she can't name.

There are residences still being made, sectors being carved into neighboring hillsides. Laborers sweat in the late morning sun, and the smell of people and animals mingle on the weird, hard roads. She catches the word 'boomtown' falling from Haku's lips, and though she doesn't say it, she likes the term. This place burst into being like an explosion, and the fires are still scorching the land around it.

The snake around Watanabe's neck seems to grow agitated, and she notices that people are staring at them now. Their group is drawing eyes, and it's enough to make her nervous.

In front, Watanabe seems to change by the second, her crouched posture straightening, her steps lengthening into languid strides, and her bearing becomes more regal the more Temari watches. It's an interesting evolution to witness, because for all she's dressed in simple traveling clothes, the woman in front of her is nothing less than a noble. There is suddenly a aloofness in her eyes, a proud manner befitting a highborn lady.

Temari may dislike her, may even go so far to say she detests her, but she will give credit where it is due. The moment she stepped foot into the country, Watanabe assumed the role of Lady, and she doesn't need flowing robes and jewels to prove it.

In the distance, a group makes its way past the city walls to greet them, an entourage of ninja. Their uniforms snap in the breeze, and their intimidating manner radiates authority. It's a group Temari would do her best to avoid if she saw them by herself, because even she can smell the blood on their freshly washed hands. One of the group in particular sticks out, tall and slender, wearing the hat that marks him Otokage, and the moment his golden eyes latch on to the group, Temari feels a shiver run down her spine.

There is something powerful in that gaze, something cold and hungry that speaks of unwavering destruction to any obstacle that stands in his way. She doesn't know the man, has only ever seen him twice, but she wants to run the moment he spots them. Her instincts tell her to take her team and leave, to keep going despite her aching limbs and sore feet, because if she stays, she'll die.

It's the way Watanabe made her feel since the incident on the beach.

The Otokage draws near, and the coterie around him allows him to step forward, emerging from their formation. His long legs carry him towards the group, and for a split second Temari swears she sees Watanabe reach out and squeeze the hand of The Demon of the Mist, but she steps away from the safety of her formation as well.

They meet somewhere not quite in the middle of the assembled mass, and there isn't much ceremony, nothing but hushed, sibilant whispers that don't carry past the two of them. After a few minutes, Watanabe turns back around. Her face is blank, her entire form controlled and lax, but something has shifted and changed. She's even more distant, if that's possible, and she pins the Suna trio with her eyes.

"Your father is here," she tells them, and Temari suddenly wonders if the beach house full of S-rank criminals is still an option.

It's quiet as Orochimaru examines Ryuishi.

He tried to separate her and Zabuza, of course, but he's has been doing that for years now, and it hasn't worked very well for him. Yes, the the brats from Suna may have been shuffled off to their jounin-sensei, a man who went by 'Baki', but Orochimaru accomplished little else. A good thing, too, because Zabuza didn't miss the freshly healed fingers of that jounin, the first knuckles of his pinkies cut clean off, nor did he miss the way 'Baki-sensei' looked at Ryuishi with nothing but pure loathing in his eyes. The Suna native may have refrained for the sake of propriety, but that jounin wanted her dead in the worst way.

Just one more person to watch.

Haku, of course, remained beside them, a bit too genuinely curious about the Otokage's science, poking his nose into charts in the room, mumbling pharmacology terms underneath his breath. He's a smart boy, and loyal to boot, but Zabuza hasn't forgotten how very much like his mother he is. The man already holds one member of his group hostage, and he won't get another.

The woman in question is unhesitating in her acquiescence of Orochimaru's commands, allowing him to examine every inch of her, taking blood and bone samples. He pokes and prods her flesh with distant coldness that Zabuza detests, filling syringes with liquid and

asking a litany of questions she answers with vacant certainty. For all her protests, her time with that man has left its mark, and he's not talking about the scar on her throat. This quietness, this stillness, it isn't hers. It's his behavior layered over her own, appropriated to suit her needs, and he doesn't like it.

She's barely spoken on the journey here, and she used to be nothing but chatter. She's dormant, deep inside her own thoughts, and all Zabuza can do is stand by her side while she figures things out. He decides then that the Kiri delegation, the actual one, can wait a bit, new Mizukage be damned. He's not letting her come within a hundred feet of that man and a scalpel, not by herself.

Golden eyes slide over to where Zabuza is standing once more, and he doesn't miss the way Orochimaru's expression folds in distaste. The worst part is that he knows the man doing it on purpose. A ninja of his caliber could conceal his thoughts and expressions with ease if he wanted to, but no. The bastard wants him to *know* how much he doesn't want him here.

"Physically, you are in workable condition. Lab results will prove the rest, and direct me on how to begin repairing any lasting damage. You have a single night to prepare for yourself, and I expect you to join me in the morning to discuss things," Orochimaru orders.

"Understood," she affirms boredly.

The man hums, drawing himself up and running his fingers along some of the glass tubes filled with blood. Not much passes between them, and Zabuza knows that the snake is scheming. He would have tried harder to separate them if he wasn't. Ordered different quarters, or had his pawns get in the way.

"Haku, of course, can visit his cousins, and I hear the Mizukage requests that Momochi-san seek them out as soon as possible as well," he continues, and Zabuza takes satisfaction in knowing he was right. *There* is the wedge.

"We'll see," she murmurs breezily, picking at the fabric of her pants distractedly.

Orochimaru pauses then, watching her with hooded eyes, seeing something there. He doesn't speak of it out loud, but when she raises her head to meet his look with one equally as veiled, he feels a tingle at the nape of his neck.

They both know the medical examination here is more for physical injury, and her suspicions were carefully penned out to him in code before now, but seeing it is something else. She's not cracked, but something has shifted inside her. Many years he strived to rid her of her sentimentality, to bring her to the culmination of what she could be. Perhaps others would call it her downfall, but they would be wrong.

She's determined now, shut off from her clustered, frantic thoughts, and she's questioning everything. Her leader betrayed her, her friends came too late, and some of her followers are beginning to show their true colors. She stands on the edge of a turning point, and she's deciding which direction to take. Does she truly live for the benefit of others? Will she strive onward for the sake of sentimental morality? Is it justice she seeks, or is she more at home with chaos?

Orochimaru himself was once there, decades ago, and his choice led him to new heights. He is interested to see where hers will take her, because there is ruin in her eyes. But not her own, he thinks.

"We shall see," he agrees calmly, picking up his charts and dropping his palm to pat her young ward's head. The boy sighs as the chart is taken from his hands, and Orochimaru begins to wheel away the samples, but he catches one last glance of Ryuishi from the corner of his eyes.

Again, he thinks of all the forms she's taken over the years. Like water, she's changed her state again and again to suit her environment, and yet never quite like this. It's not the rain of the Rakki Ryu that quenches the hungry earth below, or the river that

roars on the battlefield. It isn't the steam that passed like smoke when she was drifting and building in her youth, or the cloud that floated high above.

No, he thinks. This is the tide. The steady constant that sweeps in and out, bringing change with it.

The door closes behind him.

Breakfast comes, and Orochimaru is gratified to see her enter alone. Or, perhaps as alone as she ever is, because the swordsman's presence clings tight to her, the remnants of his chakra chasing her heels. His mind is with her, if his body is not, because though he is far away-most likely doing business with the Mizukage-he still remains attuned to her presence, keeping track of her with his limited sensing abilities.

It must be very hard for him to do, because for all his skills, he is no sensor. How many years did it take him to carve out her signature into his memory, and how many more to build up his limited range so he could monitor her from afar?

The question is, of course, a mild curiosity at best, and Orochimaru carefully chews his egg as she settles herself, her sleeveless Ao Dai brushing the floor as she seats herself, the fabric of her pants sweeping her ankles. He is slightly surprised to see her hair in a long braid instead of its usual pinned bun, but it's nothing out of the ordinary.

She helps herself to a small portion of rice and vegetables, looking stoic as she consumes her meal in silence. It is, of course, the limited peace they share before things begin in earnest, and he is appreciative that after all the tiresome, tedious events that have occurred recently, they can still have the ability to share this.

The moment passes in due time, but instead of pushing forward in impatience, she waits for him to begin. He finds the behavior curious,

if not pleasing.

"I think," he says, after he places his tea back down, his lips still warm from the heated liquid and ceramic, "you know my biggest displeasure."

She shrugs. A sloppy gesture, more common than elegant. "Kisame and Itachi." She meets his eyes, and her fingers curl around her own cup, drawing heat from it. "You want them dead."

He pulls his lip back in distaste at the use of their first names, at the familiarity of it all. She's picked another pair of pets, but unlike the young ones, these can kill her, and unlike her swordsman, they have openly shown their disloyalty. He wants them both gone, far away from his kingdom and people, but it seems the chances of that are slim.

"They followed you," he informs her, because though he might not be able to back up his claim with evidence, he knows them both enough to know that they will hold on tightly to what peaks their interest. She holds that place of dubious honor now. Always has, to some extent, for her little unit leader, and now the eldest Uchiha as well.

"I'm not surprised," she returns calmly, unwavering in her conviction.

"Tell me," he prompts. "How ever did you convince the illustrious Uchiha Itachi to your side?"

She doesn't answer, a wise choice. There is only so much he can read from silence, but he has years of working with her. He knows that if he keeps prodding and herding, she may slip up. She doesn't always, but it's a pleasant surprise when it occurs.

"I know the boy, I know he would do anything for family. Did you hold you Sasuke hostage at your pet jinchuuriki's side? Perhaps you helped Itachi himself when he was younger, schooled him in darker things while hiding away at Hatake's side?" he theorizes out loud.

No answer. Ah, well, he will find out in time. He has plenty of it to play with these days, what with his immortality and all.

"Regardless," he sighs, "If they are seen, if so much of a whisper of them being sighted reaches my ear, I will cut them down, and you *will* pay," Orochimaru promises coolly, and she smirks, infuriatingly enough.

"You can't," she counters. "Not even you could defeat Itachi, let alone the both of them."

He sneers at her, momentarily enraged, but it passes quickly. It's amusing, in hindsight, because he is a gamemaster still, and she has relegated herself to the life of a lowly piece.

"I wonder, how many years has it been since then?" he muses, pretending to look upward for direction. "I wonder what body I inhabit now, and which Kekkai Genkai it holds? And however would they fare against two of the Sannin, not just one of them?"

This seems to make her frown, her eyes narrowing into slits. It's a fierce look, harsh and cold. He likes it on her.

"Who?" she demands, and he grins, turning to face her once more.

"Jiraiya," he says. "It seems that my teammates do not trust me, even after all this time. They sent him along to 'ensure my safe return to Otogakure and further establish friendly ties between villages'."

She makes a derisive sound, which he would echo, if he did not deem the action pedantic. Konoha has no wish to establish further ties, already caught in a treaty. However, Tsunade-chan most likely did wish to receive a reliable report on his village from a notable spymaster, and Jiraiya always did love hounding his steps.

"That fuckin' guy," she mumbles, casting her gaze to the side, most likely thinking of his teammates godson. Orochimaru can conclude

from the child's absences and her own vague missives that he was sent home under the watch of Hatake. She most likely thought he would be astoundingly safe so near two of the Sannin, and laments his teammates' poor choice.

"If it helps, he left his summoning scroll behind for the boy to sign. He should do fine under Tsunade's instruction," Orochimaru drawls, still appreciative of his superior information and intellect. He's feeling giving, because her jinchuuriki project is so deliciously promising. The Suna child seemed so very taken with her.

"Tsunade is great, but she can't teach him the Rasengan," she huffs, irritated. The words give him an insight as to just how far she planned and how much she researched the boy, and that, in turn, makes him smile. She's stupid and reckless at times, yes, but this is what he has cultivated. Such a bright child.

"Hatake knows the theory of his father's techniques, and will pass them on should you ask it of him," Orochimaru dismisses. "He may do it regardless, but a heartfelt request wouldn't hurt." The way he words it makes her visibly suspicious, and she straightens out once more, lips pursed. He smiles back, all fangs and teeth, and her look darkens.

"What are you implying?" she asks coldly, and Orochimaru feels a bit of elation, the gift of a trick well played, and a punishment going according to plan. He contains it, wrapping it up to enjoy at a later time, keeping his voice even and features level.

"Nothing I haven't said before, only made more pertinent by the matters at death of the Grass daimyo, the rumors of attacking civilians roaring the name of the Rakki Ryuu, your long and sudden absence... Things are adding up, and the Land of Rice is losing face. Our good standing in the courts and your own holdings with the people are at risk."

She inhales sharply, seeing his game, and she grits her jaw, glaring at him. "No," she says. "There isn't time for this nonsense,

Orochimaru. There is a *civil war* on the horizon, and I have things to do. The merchants need attention, as do certain markets. I have the network to restructure, and you know exactly what must be done with the tribe."

He raises an eyebrow at her vehemence, because he didn't think she would be quite so honest about it. He knows, of course, that the errant parts of her kingdom must be culled from the herd, but he didn't think she would have the heart for it. Inwardly, it makes him contented. She's grown in her captivity, and the results of that change he could never invoke are sitting before him. How satisfying to see.

"You can do all of those things still. But you know as well as I that you need to better your standing in the eyes of the nobles, and the simplest and most efficient way is a union with a notable name. They cannot mock your blood or lack thereof if you make a match, and the protection of prestige will keep our kingdom together, not to mention finally give your words weight with the ruling class," he scolds, knowing every word to be truth.

She bares her teeth at him anyway. "I will *not* be your pawn, Orochimaru. I won't marry into a clan or bloodline for the theoretical good of anyone. I will not bear a child to seal said union to sate your curiosity about my own gifts, and I won't attend a single omiai with a pompous noble for all the honor and prestige in the world-

He smiles then, wickedly delighted by drawing out a reaction from her. Her ire and frustration permeate the air, and he knows the punishment is fitting. Already, the mere thought of it troubles her.

"The nobles won't have you," he states placidly, halting her rant. "You are a lowborn gutter child, and your ideas scare them. However, your strength and monetary worth, not to mention that intelligence that scares them so much, make you a suitable match for their higher ranking military leaders. A match which relies more on courtship and harmony between individuals, after the eligible person has had their debut, of course."

There is a dawning look of shock and cold horror on her face as she thinks, and he holds his sly grin. Yes, a debut at a notable event, like the one during the Chuunin Exams, where afterwards word would be sent out to interested parties of eligibility. No omiai, no matches, just rumors and hearsay, as well as regional tradition.

"It's ironic, isn't it? When you were younger, you were almost an oiran, a courtesan to a general or noble, but you escaped that fate and abandoned your past. These days, however, I see you reclaiming certain figures from it, so I thought I would give you this as well," he informs her. It does no good to punish a child without them knowing why, of course. He wants her to learn from her petty mistakes. To keep getting better instead of going back to her past.

She gapes at him, seemingly stunned speechless, and he supposes she's figured it out. That she can say and act as she pleases, but he's opened the door for matches to be made. He doesn't particularly care if she does make one, at least, not right now, but he does know she will dislike the idea with her entire being and detest the sterility of it, as well as the way others will constantly watch it.

"Do not disappoint me again, Ryuishi," he says, keeping his knife-like smile, and she scrambles up, clenching her fists. "Or I will make you into the piece you seem desperate to be."

She sneers.

"Off to the merchants with you," he says, making a mocking shooing gesture. "Unless, of course, you wish to spar with me?"

She snaps her teeth at him, rearing her head back, and for a moment he thinks she's going to attempt a sution jutsu at point blank range, but she breathes in and settles herself, seeming to remember where she is. There is a certain cold distance in her eyes when she opens them again, and he frowns when he sees it. Her temper is a fiery thing, and he isn't used to... this.

"This is nothing but a distraction," she informs him bluntly, pivoting on her heel. There is a whirlwind of fabric, and she is striding away, hands clenched into fists at her side.

Now by himself at the table, he drums his fingers against his cup, watching the spot she was sitting in just moments ago. He expected screaming, yelling and violence. Perhaps she would work herself into such a frenzy he would have to forcibly subdue her. But he didn't expect her to just walk away.

He frowns.

Why does it feel like he is missing a piece of the equation?

AN: So, We see a lot of things here. We see Ryuishi's head being out of wack in a new way, and Zabuza and Ryuishi being emotionally stunted yet affectionate. We see Temari, and the inside of Rice. We see that for all her talk in the start, Ryuishi has actually been more influenced by her environment than she'll admit, adopting political rules she initially hated, and we also see Orochimaru being a shit for the luls. Before anyone starts complaining about the political marriage aspect, I want to say some things. The first is (spoiler) red herring. The second is that often, in the game of feudal systems, this happened all the time. Specifically, I modeled this one a bit like what went down with Cleopatra and Rome, mixed in with Khan's aunts and sisters, as well as what Elizabeth the first was forced into. I also want to say that the war, as it is, is being exaggerated by Ryuishi, and is more of a series of terrorists attacks by the Mumei right now.

A big thanks to my lurkers, my favoriters and followers. Many blessings to my reviewers, who keep me strong.

Many thanks to my Beta Enbi, who is reliable and constantly a blessing to work with.

In Which Politics Occur

I do not own Naruto.

Jiraiya has seldom seen someone more in their element.

He watches the esteemed Lady of Otogakure, his teammate's prized student, work the merchants of the Trader's Square like the conductor of a play, breaking up heated arguments between sellers and buyers, directing the flow of goods like an extension of her limbs. He doesn't really focus on what she's saying, because even though he could read her lips or enhance his senses, it wouldn't matter what her words were. Only her actions.

She has cold eyes, these days. Colder than when she was in Konoha, even more dead and distant. The look she had before troubled him, but this one seems even worse for some reason. There's a steeliness there that wasn't present before, a determination and grimness.

He frowns down at the scene, tapping his toes on the balcony. There is an interesting mix of goods being moved below. There is, of course, the core staples, like rice and produce, river fish and textiles. Yet there is more than that. Luxury goods, like fine silks and soaps, and medicinal herbs by the wagonful. Bandages and gauze, books and tools, all being moved.

Perhaps most telling, however, is the raw metal.

Gleaming bars in crates, moved by teams of shinobi to traders' caravans. He's surprised by the sheer amount of it being hauled around, and he knows that she's planning something.

Iron, copper, and aluminum, each sorted into subcategories based on purity, and each being directed by her hand. These metals are the

backbone of the shinobi world. The iron and aluminum are necessary for every tool in a ninja's arsenal beside ninjutsu. Hell, even copper has its place in some sealing styles, and she's moving enough around to make or break a kingdom.

Jiraiya didn't even know she had gotten in the metal trade.

He frowns as she peers around the busy square, her traditional Rice outfit dusted at the hems. The woman looks more like a burly farmer's daughter than any lithe lady, and he feels something like disapproval in his gut. The nobles are so for a reason, and she treads where she isn't wanted. He's seen the dragon altars in the lowly slums. He can see the way people on the streets acknowledge her with bowed heads and hushed whispers as she walks in the walled city.

She may have had a hand in building this strange village, with its strange beige walls and hard streets. He can see her Mizu influence in its canals and sprawling vines, see the touch of her in the mix of people and bustling life, but she doesn't deserve to be hailed as she is, to walk the streets like a hero among the people.

She isn't one of the greats. He doesn't know if she ever will be. She didn't unite warring clans like the First Hokage. Yes, she may have saved three from the purges of Kiri, and they walk among the locals, proud founding members of this trade hub of a city, but it isn't the same. She didn't take the people who were at war with each other, who hated each other for centuries, and usher in a new era.

She's not like his sensei, who struggled for years, burdened with a position that was meant to be passed on long ago. She didn't watch her spouse die, didn't alienate her family for the sake of the people. She did not help win a war and decide victory when all was thought to be lost.

She is no Sage of Six Paths, bringing new arts to share with the world, promoting peace and harmony. Her words may be nice, but her actions are wedges that drive people farther and farther apart.

The art and culture springing forth from Oto is the work of the people, not her.

No. She is not a hero. She merely rides the wake of a few cheap actions, stirring the chaos to drive herself higher.

Maybe he is not being fair. Maybe his judgement is clouded because of how close she is to his godson, the legacy of his greatest pupil, and how bitter he is over that fact. Maybe he is biased because she assisted in political machinations to overthrow his sensei, to leave him dishonored, best friend dead and his genin team at arms.

That is his choice as a human being. He simply doesn't like her.

Footsteps echo behind him, light and near soundless. He feels a jolt down his spine, surprised at the proximity of them. Whoever is approaching is good, holding an incredible level of skill. He hasn't been snuck up on in years. He smells belladonna and ash, catches a flash of crimson, and his brows fly to his hairline as he fully notices his guest. She's lovely, all porcelain beauty and curving grace. She's the type of figure he might hesitate to write about, not only because she has such a high position, but because he's afraid words might not capture her right.

"She's quite the lady, isn't she?" the Godaime Mizukage greets, her voice honey and poison.

"I don't know," he says, tracing his eyes down her figure. "I think there is ten times the woman standing beside me."

She lets out a quiet laugh, leaning against the railing. The burning curtain of her hair shines in the temperate sun when she shifts to face him, smiling with her eyes closed. Though it seems the picture of serenity and grace, he feels the threat stirring in his gut. She'd melt him with a sigh as soon as she'd respond to such a line.

"I see Konoha is already making moves toward Otogakure. Unsurprising, considering who the Kage is," she says. "I guess it's a

bit of a race then, but I wonder if they really sent *you* . You seem a bit old for the task."

Jiraiya scowls good-naturedly at the jibe. No, he's not here for the nonsense Orochimaru is putting the girl through. He's here to keep an eye on the snake himself, but it's good to have confirmation that Mist is entering the auction.

He strikes a pose. "So cruel. Why, I have thousands of fans. Who wouldn't want a piece of the Gallant Jiraiya?" And while the fact that she doesn't even rise to take the bait wounds his ego a bit, it's nothing he can't heal from. She's lovely and strong, in the way that stimulates the part of his brain that loves a woman who can kill him, but she'll never hold a candle to Tsunade. Not even in that blue dress.

Her placating smile doesn't falter, so Jiraiya keeps one of his own. They are flimsy things, little more than cheap masks, but playtime is over now that introductions are done. He leans over the railing again, appearing to watch the scene before him, but they both know it is a lie. It would be utter idiocy to leave even a fragment of attention elsewhere with an opponent of this caliber.

"I hear Ao is still around, sporting that stolen eye of his," he says idly, and she doesn't even flinch. Instead, she gestures a dainty palm out towards the streets below, but perhaps more pointedly towards a few of the more prominent shinobi that are visibly from Water Country clans.

"Haven't you heard of the spoils of battle, Jiraiya-san? Ao won an eye from his opponent, and Oto won clans we now fight to bring back. That is the way of things," she tells him in her lilting voice.

Jiraiya's voice is cool when he says, "Maybe in your village, but in ours, we have things called boundaries and loyalty," he says.

Her smile grows tight, condescending and cruel all at once. "Is that what kept the Uchiha clan alive? Boundaries and loyalty?" she

drawls, and the point sinks in like a knife to the kidney. She speaks of the subject broadly, obviously unfamiliar with the details, but he knows the story, and that makes it all the worse for him.

He doesn't speak, she doesn't need him to. She asserts herself verbally once more, making sure he realizes that she isn't someone to be trifled with.

"The way I see it, things like boundaries and loyalty will always be changing. Even if they remain to the same person or nation, the loyalty must change as the concept evolves. Any boundaries that do not warp and bend with the flow lead to stagnation and sour the waters, and any loyalty that remains still is no true loyalty at all," she divulges. Her eyes open to take in the scene once more, shining teal filled with ambition.

"A very Water Country philosophy," he comments haughtily. "But I believe in a will that burns forever, and a loyalty that isn't swayed by the flow of time. If the person changes, or the idea, than they are not what I was loyal to in the first place, though a seed of that being may remain."

She huffs out a breath, amused. He knows it is because his philosophy is as much Fire Country as her was water. Her hand raises to cup her chin, and her smile turns predatory as she face him. "I suppose that it doesn't quite matter though. The eye remains in Ao's possession, and a portion of the Noble clans have pledged allegiance to Oto. We'll just have to see what we can win back, won't we?"

He frowns at her, glancing back to the woman working below. He catches a new figure trailing the shadows, invisible save for the long shadow his sword casts. His presence lingers in the air, threatening and territorial, making some of the traders instinctively wary of the corner where he lurks.

"You think it will be that easy? You think her old teammate will just sweep her off her feet, bring her to the village they were born in, and

you'll have the best pieces on the board? Maybe an alliance with Oto and some of your clans to go with it?"

She taps her fingers on her cheek, watching the two below. As if sensing his presence, despite her lack of skill in that area, Watanabe turns towards the shadows. Nothing physically changes, but the spot does hold her attention.

"I think that I would do a great many things for my country, Jiraiya-san, and bringing a lost soldier home is far from the worst," she retaliates calmly.

Jiraiya snorts, standing straight and crossing his arms. That little staring contest down below means nothing. He's had longer ones with Orochimaru, and he can't stand the man.

"You know what I see?" He forges ahead before she can cut in. "I see two people that have been dancing around sexual tension for years, and when it snaps, they are going to go at it like animals, but it's not the romance you have in mind. Those two are Kaijuu through and through, and they won't work like you want them to. No, her best match would be with somebody who can guide her when she loses her way, be the light in the darkness, not another beast that will rampage beside her."

"And you have just the person in mind," she drawls scathingly. Her smile hasn't budged, and that makes the tone of her voice all the more cutting.

"In a way, yes, in a way, no. Konoha has boundaries, Godaime-sama, and we want peace. That woman down there, she isn't peace, not even close."

This seems to genuinely please the Mizukage, who turns around, standing just as straight, her teeth showing through her smile. If possible, her genuine pleasure is more unnerving than her cold facade, and twice as pretty.

"No, not peace," she agrees, raising her hand to pat his shoulder. They meet eyes, and though she is shorter than him, he feels that there is no gap between them. Here, foreigners in a foreign land, there is no Jiraiya the Toad Sage or Mei Terumi of the Lava Release. There are only strangers around them, and here they are equals, if only for a moment.

"Down there, that is *power*, and with that... well, maybe someone can find a way to your fantastical idea of peace," she says, and he feels his hands grow clammy and his tongue grow clumsy as she chuckles to herself, walking away. He doesn't say anything more, because he knows it would fall on deaf ears. Power isn't the way to peace. Not like she wants it to be.

She rounds the corner, and he shakes himself, letting out a breath and running his hand down his face. Damn, but does he hate these games. He's a spymaster, not a politician. What was Tsunade thinking?

Once more, the shadow of the swordsman catches his eye, and Jiraiya sighs, feeling pity. He's not going to get anywhere standing silently in the darkness like that, Jiraiya himself knows from experience.

Maybe they can't love each other, but Jiraiya honestly meant what he said to the Mizukage. They're teammates, already bound for life as it is, and they have a ward together for the Sage's sake. Things are bound to happen.

Looking back to the woman leading the merchants, though... Well, he thinks that the boy better hurry. Things change fast on the field, and she looks like she's about to go to war.

"Hurry up kid," he mutters quietly to the swordsman that can't hear him. "Don't make the same mistake."

In ages past, in a world Ryuishi's no longer part of, there was a church. A big one, a major player in the game of religions. It was enormous, and the religion grew so powerful it conquered nations. Its laws ruled kingdoms, dictating what the nobility could and could not do. Its hierarchy was respected, its clergy produced breakthroughs in science, literature and art. It was corrupt, yes, perhaps always so, but without it the world would not be a shadow of what it was. Its life and continuation changed everything.

The metaphor isn't completely form-fitting. The Mumei will never be the Catholic Church. For one thing, the heavy eastern influence changes everything, as does the education and lifestyle of the labor and working classes. Another part is that she really was vocal about trying to make it not a religion, but sell herself as a common person trying to make their way through.

The problem probably arises from the differences. For one thing, Kami, Oni, Akuma-they aren't gods as the west knows them. They are spirits, and once recognized, anything can become one. They spring from nature, people, and even objects. It's not the same as the timeless entities her mother told her about that existed in the jungle long before humankind, and the specters that would outlast the stars themselves. It's not the prayers and wooden pews of the old community synagogue, or the fluorescent lights of the new ones.

This group of hers is incomplete, not near old enough. The Mumei are hardly twenty years old, still infants in the grand scheme of things, but this world runs on chakra and steam. Its recorded history can be traced orally for only a couple hundred years, and its written scrolls can only travel half that. It hit fast forward like it was on steroids, gobbled up her ideas and philosophy, and twisted them in ways that took centuries and millennia in her old life.

She feels like maybe this is what the reigning Cardinal felt when he saw those ninety-nine theses stapled onto his door. That maybe this is how Socrates felt when Plato disagreed, and Aristotle ran to teach Alexander.

Then again, it's a bit egotistical, thinking like that. She can barely recall who those figures are, what they did, but she remembers that she is nothing but a match stroke in the dark compared to their volcanoes.

She's a gnat penis problem, and they had whale dick troubles.

The thing is that her little group-or whatever, since it was never quite hers but also totally is-isn't actually gone. What has happened is that the sects are fractured... fracturing? Shit. She doesn't know.

Some of the tribe (most of it, really) is under Hanako's rule. Ryuishi wanted it that way-you know, before Hanako lost her fucking marbles and toted their asses on a terrorism campaign like the bastard child of the Khmer Rouge and IRA, recruiting rural folks and bombing what they saw as the ruling class. It wouldn't even be that bad if Ryuishi personally hadn't instructed the indoctrination of willing civilians into the Shinobi arts back in the beginning. The clans under her rule taught interested parties how to defend themselves, how to utilize chakra and wield weapons, and then some returned to the tribe. Hell, the tribe probably had a few Kekkei Genkai users running around in it.

It was all peaches and cream, or at least, she thought it was, because the shit going down isn't the product of three months of abduction. It's the result of years of planning. There's no way Hanako fucking stumbled upon the amount of weapons this would take, or had the resources conveniently stored away. No, that ungrateful little twat saw Ryuishi's disappearance as an opportunity and took it like a dog with a bone.

And now what remains is fucking tearing itself apart, because those civilians were apprentices, they were students and family of the clan members under her control. The tribe was friends with the information network, and it was fucking a team with the militant gangs she had. Brothers and sisters, mothers and aunts, husbands and wives- they are fucking losing it, because their family up and lost its shit, started running around, and began ruining everything.

Which is why Ryuishi has to fucking stand in the light, be strong and firm. She has to be the stability, the poise, while they all make up their minds. What she wants to do-what she knows she will end up doing-is hunt the tribe down and cleanse it. Rid the world of her mistake, purge it from the living, and make examples of those that reach too far, because she always gives a choice, but choices have fucking consequences.

What she is going to do is assemble a team and attempt one last chance, one last fucking olive branch, before she dedicates her life to cleaning up this mess.

She nibbles on her toast, not really hungry, just enjoying the way the sugar and spice mingle on her tongue, and she discreetly slips another fruit out of the big decorative bowl and into the folds of her clothes. She'll save it there for later, when-

"You're food hoarding again."

Ryuishi chokes on her toast, ever the elegant and demure lady, and hacks up cardamom and cinnamon dust.

Kisame doesn't say anything about the retching sounds she makes, although he's mildly concerned about the noise she's making. Theoretically, there could be guards listening, but for some reason he doesn't think there will be. Yes, Zabuza is in eyesight, but that's about it. It's the reason he chose now of all times to approach.

Not that it was easy. The whole city is a mess of near-airtight security. Everything is ridiculously observed, from the city streets to the watery canals, but he is one of the best for a reason.

... Alright. Maybe not. Samehada had been guzzling down his chakra like it needed it to breathe ever since they crossed the borders. Honestly, without his sword he would have never stood a chance of making it through security checkpoints and random patrols, and he's almost certain that Ryuishi knowingly left small openings behind her for Itachi and him to slip through. He's certainly

isn't going to willingly mention the fact that he only got in the estate because two brothers on her guard detail noticed him for who he was. He never knew many kids back in Kiri, but Hōzuki Mangetsu sure as hell recognized him, and little Suigetsu seemed excited to see a real life 'big sword'.

Their mother, however, and leader of the area's patrol group, had nearly turned them in. The only thing that stopped her was the fact that Kisame had dug an old blue necklace out of his pocket and put it down before them all.

The woman still didn't think it was enough, had personally gone to ask Ryuishi some things. Things that Ryuishi had most likely had forgotten, seeing as she was surprised he appeared tonight.

"There are two of the Sannin here," she rasps, pounding her chest. He shrugs, because he already knows. He got her message.

"Itachi's on lookout detail," he says with a nonchalant shrug, leaning against the wall. From across the way, Zabuza glares, and Ryuishi sends a rude gesture across the courtyard to the room where he sits, high in some fancy delegate's quarters.

"Orochimaru is going to sniff out a genjutsu sooner or later. He wants your head on a platter," she snaps, wiping her mouth with the back of her hand and glaring at him from the corner of her eyes.

Kisame waves off her concerns. "Itachi's got it. The snake won't know we're here as long as you keep making tiny gaps in the security. Where is all the metal going anyway?"

"Forges down south, and Iron Country," she huffs, fiddling with the apple in her hand. She looks at it consideringly, then back at the bowl. It disappears somewhere in the fabric of her clothes, and he guess that hunger leaves its mark. She's probably carrying a Kilo of candy and rations on her at any given moment.

"Weapons and money," he comments lightly, figuring it out. "Planning something?"

"Yeah," she fires back. "A righteous kick in the dick to the bastard who didn't listen and stay at the house."

He doesn't answer that, simply observing her make her way over to the window where she sends several rapid fire signs to Zabuza, who aggressively signs something back. Kisame sees that their hodge-podge of street sign and mission code has evolved into something barely decipherable to the outside eye, made from a mix of black ops code from all different countries and underground slang.

She makes a sound in her throat, gestures to the walls around them, hiding them from view, and the strange angles of the buildings. Zabuza seems to sweep the empty courtyard with his eyes, and curiously signs something back that makes her snort. It looks like the Suna word for assailant, the Waterfall slang for cunnilingus, Frost Country's shorthand for exposure, and the Iwa standard for elimination by dismemberment.

Kisame kind of doesn't want to know.

"Zabuza wants to see your junk," she deadpans, not even turning around.

"He does not," Kisame groans.

She rolls her eyes. "Show him your sword you jack-fuck," she says, and this, Kisame can oblige. He unsheathes Samehada, who is plump from the regular feeding, and the sword shivers and ripples from such close proximity to Ryuishi, whose own chakra is smothered and almost undetectable.

Zabuza flashes through seals.

"He says your junk is acceptable." She sighs. "And he asks if you want to see his now that he's seen yours."

Kisame doesn't answer, growing tired of her halfhearted wordplay. He simply clips Samehada onto his back once more, steps into sight, and signals over her head, propping an elbow on her shoulder as he flips through old black ops code.

"Have you considered not?" she says blandly.

He shushes her, twisting his fingers and trying to reply as fast as Zabuza signs. The other man never learned to slow his fingers down and leave breaks in between words, so the sentences all run together. It's like deciphering the movement of a particularly hyper wasp, all speed and motion.

"I'm trying to talk," he informs pointedly her after a second.

"You're signing code about keeping your weapons at the ready in case of disaster, which, first of all, doesn't make any sense because your weapons are always ready. Secondly, it sounds like an allegory for your dicks, and makes me vaguely uncomfortable. Zabuza has signaled the word 'sword' like seven times in the last minute."

When he doesn't answer, she shoves his elbow off of her and walks away, turning her back on them both. He hears her footsteps draw closer to the door, holds up his hand for Zabuza, and cranes his neck around to watch her. She's drawing materials into her arms, bits of paper and scraps of map.

"Where are you going?" he demands, but she ignores him, opening the door. In a flash, he's on the other side of the room, shoving the door closed as fast and as quietly as he can. In the shadows and darkness, he looks at her like she's lost her mind, staring at the line of illumination that draws itself across her face from the space between wall and entrance.

"My lady?" somebody inquires from outside the door-a guard, stationed near the end of the hall who probably saw the it open. He was right. Not close enough to listen in.

She slaps his hands off the frame, cracking it open and poking her head out. All Kisame can see is her neck, and the golden light of the outside spilling over her scar. "I'm fine, Tatsuya," she lies, and he can hear that fake smile in her voice. "Just forgot that I have to wear pants outside my quarters."

"Please stop forgetting that," a voice that is presumably some man named Tatsuya comments dryly in the distance as Ryuishi lets out a false laugh, creeping back into the darkness, closing the door behind her.

Zabuza stares at the open window where they both stood, on alert, and Kisame has to flit back for a second to tell him that it's all clear before he turns to address the apathetic, totally calm teammate who almost just *gave him away*. That was a genin-level mistake, opening the entrance to a secured room when there were known hostiles outside. Hell, that was downright civilian. She warned him moments ago about Orochimaru and Jiraiya, and she's been infiltrating places for years. Was she just going to leave?

"What was that?" he asks incredulously, reaching out to place a hand on her shoulder.

She slaps it out of the air before it can even get close. "I have things to do." She stares at him down her nose-a respectable feat, considering she has to look up at him to do so.

Kisame is appalled. " *What?* "

"Go chat with Zabuza," she says primly, waving her hand dismissively. "My lab results came in, and I have to talk to Orochimaru-"

"You shouldn't be going near him," Kisame cuts in, and she closes her mouth slowly, turning to look at him through half-lidded eyes. He watches her brows rise, unimpressed, and catches the fleeting twist of her lips that indicates anger before it passes.

He wishes it would come back.

"And *you* should get out," she returns, and the words are strangely hurtful. He thinks they are meant to be.

"You know you make me comfortable, but lately, I think that comfortable isn't right. Not when my ease has made such a mess. You and Zabuza should heal your wounds, fix what's between you, and I..." Here she trails off, as if unsure, or not confident with voicing it out loud.

"You?" he prompts, trying not to feel satisfaction with the fact that he makes her feel comfortable, even after what he did.

Her heart hardens, and he watches metaphorical ice crawl in her eyes. She makes herself isolated, cuts herself off, and orients herself to her goal. "I do what I need to," she says.

"Ryuishi-" he tries, but she scoffs, making him swallow his words. She's as cold as Sasori was, as detached as Itachi, and as capable of brutality as he is. He doesn't like it, doesn't like having to acknowledge that she has changed from the young girl that once was, and the soft, warm, fragile woman on the beach. She's morphed to fit her situation, adapting to overcome, improvising with all the skill of genius.

(A genius at intel and sabotage, Itachi said. Kisame agrees.)

"Look, it's like this," she says. "There are people-my people-out there, causing panic and destruction. That's what people do, but the fact is I gave them a chance, and now I have to give them up. They made their bed, all of the nations did, and I'm going to make them lay in it."

He doesn't say much at first, just watching her with her stiff shoulders and squared jaw. "Why does that sound so ominous?" he finally asks her quietly, reaching out once again. She doesn't slap his

hand away when he touches her cheek with his fingertips, but she does glare.

"Ryuishi..." He pauses. "Why does it sound like like you're about to go hunting for tribulation?"

"I'm *fixing* things. I introduced some thoughts and ideas people weren't ready for, and I need to eradicate that. I can't take it back, but I can fucking show them the consequences of their actions," she states placidly.

The delivery of her words, so rational, so final, sends a bolt of lightning down his shoulders. She's predatory, strong arms and stronger resolve. For a moment he imagines her on a battlefield like this, fully grown with claws and chains, teeth bared and a tongue like a blade. No mercy, no kindness, patience run out, and he knows it's a sight he'd love to see, as messed up as that is.

"And what does that mean?"

Her gaze turns to steel.

"It means that I'm going to do what I'm good at. It means that Orochimaru can meddle all he wants, but every stupid stupid suitor is going to get the same answer. It means that I'm going to craft a hunting party of my own troops, not Oto's or any other, and I'm going to lead them to cut down their cousins, their brothers, their sisters and friends, so when they see the ashes and blood, they remember what happens when you take something too far. I'm going to make sure my children are reared properly, are strong enough to make me and you look like ants, and then I'm going to make sure they are safe as I track down every last fucking remnant of Zetsu and wipe him from the face of this earth."

(And something in her head laughs in delight at that last part. The foreign presence that makes her head hurt and her eyes ache around light becomes giddy, and it whispers yes yes yes breathlessly

inside her skull, filling it up with elation that isn't hers. It hurts, badly, but she keeps going anyway.)

"That seems like a lot," he says, looking at her thoughtfully.
"Probably gonna get complicated."

It seems like she's had enough of him touching her face, and she wraps her fingers around his wrist, cold and rough with calluses. Her eyes dare him to question her, to say she can't or to hold her back, and her fingers press ever so slightly on the pulse inside his skin.

He feels like he's swallowed worms, and they writhe around inside his gut. But in a good way.

"You gonna do it alone?" he asks her plaintively.

"Don't give a shit at this point. I can't imagine Zabuzza's just gonna just let me run," she says. "Honestly think the Mizukage is gonna throw him at me as a suitor."

"Gross," he jokes, peering at his brother in arms from across the way. He's still watching them intently, probably channeling too much chakra to his eyes, but he also seems to have scrounged up some sort of fruit (do all the rooms have bowls?). It's sort of funny how familiar it is-Zabuzza staring creepily at them from a distance, eating too much.

"Sad, actually. The Mizukage is a fucking work of art, but at this point, I'm going to see how well she likes being played. She thinks she's clever, trying to get my trade influence in Kiri, but how far will she go for it? Will she stop at manipulating my teammates, or will she buck up and take the hit if I ask for her instead?"

"Not a thing I'd like to see," Kisame admits. "I hear that woman has Lava Release. Zabuzza will never stand at the top of your army of suitors if she's around. What of the Kaijuu then?"

She gives him a flat look, peeling his hand away from her cheek. He can't help but feel warm as she re-arranges the things in her arms, dropping his hand by his side, contemplating something.

How long was he away from this? From the familiar regard of his unit? The nonsensical mess they are, and the trouble they get into? Why is it that he can only see it now, see the way that they were always messed up, always fractured and cold, but still functional? Still favorable and just, honest in their strange and chaotic dishonesty.

He softens, as much as he ever can, and he thinks about her words. He never questions her on meddling and suitors, matches and what not. To be fair, he thinks the idea is laughable, because she bit a man's throat out once when he tried to touch her against her will, but the development is annoying. Especially because she's made it clear that she hates the idea of being sold, but is trapped by political niceties and customs.

(A genius in intel and sabotage, Itachi said. Kisame knows this now. If she says yes to them all, then it becomes a game to win her favor, and she keeps face while not offending anyone. They become attuned to her wants, not the other way around, and when it all falls through, becomes null and void, everyone learns a bit. They learn what they do want from her, and what they will receive if they try to take it against her wishes.)

"Do you think it stops?" he wonders. "That we ever find peace?"

She shoots him a look, pitying, distant, and far too understanding. "I think that you still have to earn the 'we'."

This, he nods solemnly at. He knows it's not settled yet, doesn't know if it ever will be. Some things are unforgivable, and he doubts the trust will ever be the same. The fact that he is here in her room without her screaming for guard or breaking down is more than he could have hoped for. But she's not without trouble either, not without

baggage and backstabbing. They both have their ghosts to face, their wrongs to right.

"But..." she begins, almost hesitant. The steel is still there, but it is an aloofness barely tinged by compassion. "But I don't think there's ever peace, not really. I think we struggle, every single day, sometimes for years at a time. I think we work for highlights of happiness, sometimes grand moments, sometimes quiet events, where we find something to be content with in a pleasing sky or the wind on our face. I think we always fight, and the fight only ever changes form, never stopping completely."

"That's depressing," he says after a beat.

She shrugs, looking tired. He realizes that she's exhausted from fighting in all these different ways, and she doesn't need him to remind her of how depressing it can get.

"Maybe it stops when we die," he says philosophically, and her look turns dark, stoic even.

"No," she disagrees, looking like a mountain-immovable, undeniable, but distant. So very distant. "Death isn't peace. Death is unbecoming."

She sounds so sure that he pauses to contemplate what she said. It strikes him yet again that she knows so much, knows things she should have no possible way of knowing. That she has had a taint in her chakra from the very start, and a family that came before Kiri, an event that should be impossible.

"Do you know?" he asks quietly, barely louder than a breath, taking up only the effort to form the words with his lips and let them hang between them.

Ryuishi swallows, and her fists tremble around a map, but other than that, she is strong. She doesn't break apart, does cry or shout. She counts her inhales and exhales in a pattern that reminds him of

battles that took places years ago, and he recalls nightmares that left her silently screaming at the night sky.

(Maybe it's different, she thinks. Maybe it's different for everyone, tailored on a grand scale she can never hope to imagine in its entirety. She hopes it is, that her own Void, that the eternal nothingness that eats away at who she is, isn't what everyone else gets. She hopes there is a pure land for Haku, a Heaven for Kakashi and people like Rin. She prays that ancestors exist in spectre form, gathering newly dead into family arms, and guiding the next generation onward. She hopes slate shores awash with ice will greet those who need them, and that fire burns eternal in golden halls for victors and champions who fought with all their might.

Somewhere, she wants there to be great pits and fitting punishments, but never eternal, just until the soul is cleansed. She hopes that there is nothing at all for those who wish it, only a cycle, an endless exchange of energy and matter, biomass into composting fuel that feeds new life.

She doesn't know, though. She never knew any death but her own.)

"I have work to do," she says, retreating to her earlier statement. "Go make nice with Zabuza."

Kisame doesn't fight her on it, letting her have her space. He has a feeling that if he pushes it, he'll end up just pushing her further away and alienating himself from the unit again.

"I'm sure Itachi will need a break. I'll give Zabuza the coordinates to a meetup just outside the city," he replies calmly, and she nods.

"If Orochimaru and-or Jiraiya catches you, take the fight away from people and buildings. I didn't bust my ass beside the masons to have a shinobi fight ruin it. Also, don't die," she adds, turning towards the door again.

He gives her a sideways grin that he's not sure she can see as she passes by. 'Don't die' is basically the Kiri equivalent of indoctrination into a squad.

He may be far away from unit, but he's certainly climbing the ranks.

In Which Torches are Passed

I do not own Naruto.

Ryuishi's not going to meet with Orochimaru. She lied.

It has, on occasion, been known to happen.

She doesn't even feel that bad about it any more, because if you believe her after everything she's spewed, you had better bring a heavy dose of common sense and skepticism with you. Anybody close, anybody who knows her the tiniest bit, should know she'll lie her ass off. It's what she does. Like the air she breathes.

Well, not really. If she takes a step back and looks at it, she's actually been frightening truthful for the last, long while. She hasn't found much need to lie, so much as she has found the need to keep silent about things like her headache, the weirdness going on with her mindscape, and various other things.

It's actually kind of a relief to know she can still lie with any passing believability. One day, she's afraid she's going to wake up and nobody is going to believe a word she says without several cited sources and a small research paper being presented on the topic to prove she has some idea about what she's saying. After that, she'll need a degree, and it will all start being composed much like her old world, where authority on truthfulness will be delegated by extremely confusing means, and people will be telling various shades of truth-lies all the time.

For now though, she gets to lie the old fashioned way. By telling Kisame she's going to go see Orochimaru, while she actually goes to see Itachi, who has created a shadow clone to hold genjutsu that covered for Kisame.

One day, Ryuishi thinks, I'll make a plan that isn't twelve types of convoluted.

Today is not that day.

She carries her armful of carefully marked maps and sealed envelopes down the halls, threading her way around the maze like building, hoping that she's not actually doing something dumb. The answer, of course, is that she's probably doing something really dumb, but it's the best plan she has at the moment, and she has to do something other than just sit there. She's a defacto leader, or she's supposed to be. She has to start fleshing some semblance of order out of this chaos.

The sects are in uproar, and she's getting all sorts of nonsense from all directions. She can't go and fix one without leaving another to fester. She has to be in Oto to save face, work out the kinks in the trade, and begin assembling a task force to deal with the Mumei. She also has to be seen around the city, counteracting any rumors that she may have perished, and interact with politicians.

That leaves a gaping hole in the information network though, which is on metaphorical fire with contradictory reports. New from the Land of fire is flooding in, telling of how Lady Tsunade is taking over, sorting out her ranks with a fine-tooth comb. She's going through the past ten years of immigration records, looking for any suspicious activity or networking, all while holding meetings with her jounin commander and the legendary Copy-nin. That Glorious Senju bitch is trying to get rid of any influence that isn't her in Konoha, including the last remnant of Danzo, and any footholds of Ryuishi and Orochimaru. Hell, she's even succeeding to a point, because with the recent kidnapping and chaos, Mumei members are pushing to get into Rice at an alarming rate, claiming refugee status.

And that's kind of a huge problem for both Orochimaru and her.

Whole families are tumbling into the out districts of Rice, just past the first security bands, and with them comes news of Grass and Rain.

Grass, of course, is currently at war with itself, but it seems like instead of taking care of any internal problems they may have in Ame, Rain is starting a campaign to conquer Kusa, 'In order to ensure the protection of sacred tradition and embrace innovative new ideals.'

Ryuishi heavily suspects that The Akatsuki is feeling a fallout of some kind, and is desperately trying to keep their final members from abandoning them. What better way to do so then by giving them the opportunity to take over a small country?

('Tons', rants a piece of her, ignoring how that's pretty much how she endeared Orochimaru to her. 'There are tons of better ways to ensure loyalty other than that.')

Again though, that last part is speculation. In the eyes of the nation's, Ame is just doing it's best to stop a war before it spills over into the border. It's making the nobles more on edge than ever though, because after Hanzo killed off the daimyo of Rain, there hasn't been a new one, and combined with how Rice is being run, they're shitting themselves in fear.

Really, it's a mess. She hasn't even gotten started with how off the wall rumors are getting about her own life, or how Kumo has been said to be calling back their heavy hitters from the field. They thought they would be sneaky, doing it so incrementally, but Ryuishi and Orochimaru are wary of Kumo in particular for good reason. It's a near self-sustaining military powerhouse with excellent resources. If anybody could conquer it all and proclaim themselves king, it would be Kumo.

She needs....she needs to have more hands. And bodies. And minds. Ryuishi needs more of herself to go around, but she can only do so much. She doesn't trust anybody else to handle it, but needs must, and the world is forcing her to try.

Itachi is waiting for her where he said he would be, all cliché ninja, not even noticeable until he makes himself known. The funny thing is

that she doesn't even think he's trying to be particularly menacing or incredibly stealthy. Sneaky is just a part of him at this point. He's just doing what he knows. Subterfuge and secrecy is to Itachi what lies are to her, and she doesn't think they can live without them at this point.

"We don't have long," he greets blandly, melting out of the shadows of the courtyard like he's spun from the darkness itself. He appears so suddenly and quietly she nearly throws an elbow at him before she registers who it is.

She takes a deep breath, centering herself and quieting her thoughts. It's never been as easy as it is now, and it bugs her to know it's not just because she's back on her meds. Whatever bubble went up in her head is a dream and nightmare come true.

"Then I won't waste time," she says, whirling on him. The courtyard is dark, which is nice, considering her light sensitive migraine, and it's hard to make out Itachi's features in the low light. She supposes it doesn't really matter though, more of a fine detail that a need.

"I have the solution to a problem you have," she tells him, and he doesn't answer, staying covered by the foliage of a decorative shrub, his back to the wall. She supposes if she was meeting with a woman she didn't trust in the castle of a man who tried to kill him and steal his body, she too would be on guard, regardless of any history they share.

"You are exiled from the Clan by Sasuke, right? No hope of returning to Konoha for a very, very long time? Tsunade refusing to acknowledge a damn thing, while you attempt to uphold the image that you totally are a heartless killer?"

He flinches at her bluntness, which is surprising to her, because she didn't know she could ever get a reaction out him. He's like stone, solid and unmoving in the face of her actions, and he's never shown any sign of acknowledging her tactlessness before.

"That is... a way of looking at it," he replies slowly.

She rolls her eyes. He's the one who said they didn't have much time, and yet here he is, hedging around the details she needs.

"Look, feel free to fucking stop me if I'm wrong, but you're worried. Now that you can't keep an eye on the Akatsuki, and because Sasuke rejected you -which is understandable, you still assisted wiping everyone out and straight up killed your parents- you are currently attempting to keep tabs on me, hoping to prevent another threat to your country and little brother," she outlines, and he doesn't even speak, his eyes hardened and manner frozen. She may be pushing lines here, but he outed her to her entire social group, using his genius little brain to fit all the pieces together. He made her admit that she'd been manipulating people from the start to a group of people she'd been manipulating, so if he can dish it out, he can take it.

"You acknowledge you are a threat then," he says calmly, and she wants to punch him in his sure little face, not that she could ever get close. The only reason he's sticking around here is so he can dig his nose into her business, and possibly ruin Orochimaru while he's at it. They might have an understanding between them, but she knows he wouldn't hesitate to kill her if she hadn't made direct and obvious actions to keep Sasuke out of Orochimaru's grasp, and he knows she wouldn't balk at removing Konoha from the board if it suited what she thought would be the greater good.

"I think that if you want to keep tabs on me, then you best make yourself useful," she snaps, and then she moves forward, dumping the maps and scrolls out of her arms and into his. The weight of it seems more than physical to her, and she can almost feel the strain on her shoulders lessen as she does.

He stares at them, uncomprehending.

"I admit," he says, "I don't follow."

"Congratulations," she drawls. "You are now the current Rakki Ryuu."

Itachi draws his gaze upwards slowly, turning his blank face to stare at her. He has stress wrinkles beginning at the corners of his eyes, and it's a bit sad, considering his age, but she knows that she would have them too, had Orochimaru not been obsessed with youth and vanity, ensuring her access to great night creams. Maybe she should recommend some to him.

"You wanted to keep me in check, and I need someone who will proclaim peace and follow a pacifistic path," she explains. "I need to deal with the tribe personally, and I'm not about to let Oto sink into financial ruin either, but The Rakki Ryuu is something that needs to go on."

He stares at her, then the scrolls again, like he's beginning to piece it together.

"You," he replies after a moment. "You want me to be the heir to your persona?"

"No, I want you to be the heir to what the Rakki Ryuu was originally meant to be. I didn't come up with that name, nor the lore, but for a while I did embody it to an extent. In the stories, the Rakki Ryuu spread the message of peace, communication, and worth through mostly non-violent means. They help the impoverished, the downtrodden, and the abused. The Rakki Ryuu helped whores who were raped, and taught kids to read," Ryuishi intones. She feels regret in her chest, and mourning, because even though she was lost and alone, she did good things, once upon a time. Yes, those good things got twisted and abused, but she doesn't regret the weeks and months she dedicated to innovating farming methods, or the school houses she supplied. She doesn't dislike the improved quality of life she played a tiny part in coaxing from this world.

She just regrets she twisted it to suit her own needs, and that she influenced it to the point where her own war-like tendencies became

ingrained into the culture of it.

"Once, Itachi, I had the idea that maybe I could help people out. That I could teach a better way," she admits in a softer voice. "I didn't want things from it like I do now, didn't use to calculate my actions for what they would get me in return, or how it would influence everything on a grand scale. I want that to live on."

"Why not Haku?" Itachi asks. "Why not Naruto, or Gaara?"

She bites her lip, running her hand through her bangs, and he understands then. Understands that she intended for them to be her heirs, but she's too selfish, too close to them now. They are kids, and with the violence and chaos, there is a good chance that if he takes this mantle, he will become a target like she did, chased across the nations by bounty hunters and enemy nin. Those who partake in the war will see any person voicing anything resembling her old teachings as scapegoat and a target.

Itachi isn't her child, isn't someone she's adopted. He's a man grown, who outclasses her fighting capabilities and can match her intelligence, probably even surpass it. He intended to use these facts to watch her, to stop her if it became necessary, but it seems like it's a null point now.

She's giving him the ability to usurp her from the ground up. The maps must be pocket populations, the scrolls full of numbers, and the names of informants. She's giving him everything she didn't have when she started.

"You did something I could never do," she continues gently. "You have readily displayed that you can chose the good of many over your own desires, and the ones you love. I... am weak. I would destroy everything for the sake of just a few."

He stares, wordless.

"Sasuke is young, and he might change his mind. Likewise, if you raise yourself up in the eyes of the world, seemingly seek out some sort of arbitrary redemption, Konoha might take you back. I don't know about regionalizing a figure like the Rakki Ryuu in such a way, but it's all hypothetical until that moment comes anyway."

"Why did you hide this?" It's like he's a child again. He never feels quite so young as he does around her, like a boy receiving his headband for the first time. There is so much he knows, so many things he has seen, but he can't help but recalling how she looked when he first approached her on Danzo's behalf, her face lit by firelight, her eyes older than her body. She seems to have come far from that person and place, but she still seems so old, so tired, yet even still reaching out a hand to him.

"I hid it from Orochimaru because he'd be furious to know I was giving up even a fraction of my influence. I hid it from Kisame because he worries about you, as he should, and because I'm petty and he really fucked me over," she answers.

"Momochi-san?"

She smiles, small and warm, and Itachi thinks then that he might not ever understand the trio of Kiri ninja and their weird interpersonal relationship.

"Zabuza might not even be surprised. He knows me better than I know myself," she admits.

"What if I take this and use it against you? What if I usurp control, and spread misinformation instead, turning everyone against you?" He demands suddenly. He could, it would be so simple. It would take years, yes, but he could take everything she has given him and use it to end her, end Orochimaru, once and for all.

She gives him a curious, quizzical look at that, her brow quirked high on her forehead and her lips twisted into a sardonic smirk. It's a bitter look, weary and jaded.

"Why would you do that?" She huffs out with a laugh. "If you want me gone, all you have to do is let me keep control. Just say no. Walk away."

Itachi doesn't, holding the scrolls a bit tighter, keeping his face blank. They both know he isn't going to do that, because if he did, she wouldn't go quietly. No, she'd take it all down with her, on purpose or not.

"The pin," he asks, referring to the last key detail associated with the Rakki Ryuu.

"The hairpin and chakra," she corrects. "One I will give to you after I track down the tribe. The other isn't possible to share."

He considers it further, wondering about the nature of the Rakki Ryuu. It's not common knowledge who she is, and for all she has traveled around, meeting the people in person and assisting in works, Itachi knows logically that not everyone who believes in the tale could have seen her. It's just not possible with the following she has amassed, and besides those she directly interacted with, most people who have seen her may have only observed from a distance. Her plan is plausible only because of the nature of the tale and the mass spread of it among the population. He's lithe enough to be androgynous, with long dark hair and dark almond eyes. He can mimic the seal on her back with paint and the assistance of clones. It's close enough to fit the stories, and loose enough to make the image his own with some assistance.

And then he realizes that's what she wants. She doesn't need him to be her, to be her spitting image and do things in the way she did. She needs him to craft an image of his own and bring the story full circle. She's lowborn, low class, and she brought herself up with manipulation and lies. He's highborn and clan affiliated, and he got where he is is, dishonored and disowned, by omitting the truth.

It's poetic, in a way.

"You really mean to do this," he breathes. "To choose me as an heir to this madness, to give me the responsibilities you couldn't carry."

"Wrong. I'm going to keep going as I have been. I fully intend to clean up my mistakes and sort out my troubles, but after that, I'm done. I can't be selfless, not when I'm so selfish, and even then, you will have to fight me for control," she warns. "I'm not giving you anything but a foothold and a chance. The rest is up to you."

He stares at her, and she holds his gaze for a moment, only a brief second, before looking up to the slowly rising moon. The night is still young, and there is much left for her to do, but not here, not with him.

"I gotta go to a meeting with some higher-ups. Just know, this is your choice, Itachi," she says, pivoting away, leaving him there.

A sour taste rises up in his mouth, because for a while, he thought he had her pinned down. He had her contained, identified and knowable, but she's managed to turn his position of power against him, to use his sense of responsibility and justice to bend him to her wants, and for the life of him, he can't bring himself to be upset about it.

Sabuku no Rasa, Kazekage of the Village Hidden in the Sand, thinks that out of all the indignities he has had to suffer through for the past months, this is perhaps the least offensive. Sitting in an elegant dining room in a tense silence with the Godaime Mizukage is practically a vacation compared to what has happened.

He wants to say it started with the Chunin Exams in Konoha, but that would be a lie. If he analyzes it, the problem started long ago, before he even noticed it happening, when a seemingly lowly merchant began to usurp control of the village's jinchuriki out from under him. It started with trade trickling into his lands from a mysterious source, and his own blissful ignorance.

Of course, he has attempted to regain his youngest progeny's loyalty, but for all his effort, the boy remains faithful to the insidious woman, despite it all. This latest little venture of his proves it beyond a shadow of a doubt, running away to seek her out.

It galled him, when Baki's report first came in, to know that the woman gallivanting around his village had been nothing but a facade, the cover of some particularly devious fiend. It aggravated him like little else, drawing his ire and wrath, because for years he had been fighting a battle against her influence in his village. He had tried his hardest to purge her from his economy, to use traders he had never seen her with, and sources that had no outward ties to her.

He realizes now that he had been focused on too small of a scale. She was playing the game of nations and empires while he struggled with just one. The thought that the traders that came to his village now were beyond her reach was a fallacy.

To be forced to acknowledge that fact was maddening, and a part of him remains tempted to simply pool his efforts into her elimination. Yet he knows, logically, that is his own personal desire speaking, and not what would be best for the Land of Wind. No, her extermination would not only break the treaties the daimyo signed, but also put a rift between Suna and it's allies, something it cannot afford to do, especially since Rice is the source of so much trade.

Still, it brings him some measure of satisfaction to know that she is not without troubles herself. She has been outed, publicly shamed among the upper echelons of society. The pet of that insidious snake is nothing more than a stolen dog of Kirigakure, a war child shamed and banished for years, only allowed to show her face with the Mizukage's blessing.

Rasa isn't an idiot. He knows how she did it, or he suspects he does. She bought leniency from her home country, supporting a rebellion with ill-gotten funds, and bought mercy with supplies and goods. The Mizukage allows the light punishment to continue because it is

profitable for Kirigakure. It's the same reason Suna hasn't gotten rid of her yet, and the same reason Orochimaru is Otokage.

(Well, that, and the man's devastating tactical and field capabilities. Really, Hiruzen was a fool for not making him leader when he had the chance. Orochimaru was practically made for the role, and when he didn't inherit it, he went out and conquered a small country and made it into something devastating.)

The balance is shifting though, ripe for a new power to emerge on top. As the false candy seller falls from anonymity and begins to be revealed as she is, more of her influence is lost, and a touch of Orochimaru's as well. Rasa does not know why the daimyo seem so agitated with her in particular, but he knows it has something to do with the troubles in Grass and Rain, and that if she wants to live, she has to save face in some small way, buy more protection and safety, this time at a personal cost.

The woman in question seems to finally deign to grace them with her presence, opening the door to the room with silent determination. Her entire bearing is different than what it usually is in Suna, her back straight and chin upturned, the cheery smile gone from her face. She is as stoic and quiet as the other two Kage in the room. It's a good sign. She feels threatened by them, and she's lifted her guard.

"I apologize for my tardiness," she excuses, closing the door behind her. She gives a short, formal bow, and Rasa feels a curl of cold delight in his gut. It's not quite what he would like to see from her-begging for mercy, prostrate before him-but it suffices, given her status.

"It was not long," the Mizukage allows, her voice as poisonous as a red-stone scorpion. Rasa is wary of this newcomer, because though Kirigakure is changing, its leaders have always been cutthroat and fearsome. Respectable not only for their might, but for their devastating cruelty.

"Where is the Otokage?" Rasa asks, cutting through the banal small talk. It may be horrendously rude of him, but he has no patience for her.

The Lady of Otogakure, however, seems to be far too much like her co-founder, and she lifts her head, sending him a smile that could cut glass.

"I'm afraid Orochimaru will not be joining us tonight," she says, and he sends her a glare that has had men wetting themselves in fear. He didn't come to trade pleasantries or lies with the Lady of the village. He came to treat with the Otokage, to have Orochimaru call his partner to heel, and to warn them that any further infiltrations in Rasa's village would be treated as hostile overtures. His son was out of hand, and he didn't need her nosing around any longer.

"Then there is no reason for me to be here," he answers, standing. He nods his head to the Mizukage, a formal acknowledgement between equals, and she nods back. A good sign for relations between Water and Wind.

"I never did like you Rasa," hisses out the false merchant, and the vehemence in her tone shock him, as does her absolute abandonment of all manners. He turns to stare at her, stone faced and angry, but her false smile holds, all knife edges and needle pricks.

" *Excuse me-*"

"Rice," she interrupts. "Wheat, and barley. Greens like cabbages, and alternative protein sources like soy and beans. Fresh fruit is harder, more expensive because of the wagons, but I managed to get them through."

He snaps his mouth shut, staring at her.

"Medicine, from herbs to pills to practitioners. Scrolls and books, raw cotton and woven wool. Water, Rasa. I imported water by the ton

from River, and I never poisoned it, not once. These are things I provide to Suna," she says, turning her head to the Mizukage.

"The same can be said for you, but add in the purified metal ore I make from Suna's small mines, and the the glass and silks we source near the border. I also dabble in chemicals like bleach, lye, and ammonia. I have hands in the soap business, the alcohol and drug trade, both legal and non," she says, and Rasa is stunned, not that he would show it. What babble is this?

"I am not here to deal with tantrums and ego. I am here to bow my head, take my punishment, and come to a compromise with everybody in this room," she snaps, and he stares at her, wondering where this iron will was when she played with his son, dragged his children up and down the bazaar, all giddy laughs and foul tongue.

He sits back down, intrigued, and she follows suit, seating herself in a seiza before them both. She does not submit completely, but she does not meet their eyes, and she places her hands on the table, face up. A sign of compliance.

"Intriguing way to begin. Establishing your importance while acknowledging your indiscretions and accepting the consequences," comments the Mizukage idly. She hasn't stopped eyeing the other woman since she stepped inside the room, but it is not the sort of hunger Rasa can relate to. It is a cold, ruthless desire for power in her eyes.

"As much as it pains me to admit, Rasa-san has every right to not acknowledge me in my own strength. You, Terumī-san of course, are also not obligated to," she says, and though it is delivered in a dispassionate tone, he can hear the bitterness in her voice.

"Yet here we are," Terumī says, watching the other woman pointedly.

"Here we are," Watanabe agrees plainly, holding the other's gaze with a strange intensity. "Because you two need trade and innovation

for your country, while I need to reclaim favor with your daimyo to prevent my own demise."

"Self-centered," Rasa accuses coldly. "You are here because you have finagled yourself into a position of undue authority, spat in the face of tradition and carefully maintained peace, and have sewn disharmony in place of stability."

She smiles then, laced with bitterness and something he can't quite put his finger on. Another secret she holds that he can't name.

"One does not necessarily contradict the other," she says calmly. "I am willing to subject myself to any rules you impart, with few exceptions. If you have quarrels with me, state the name and price you seek."

He's tempted, so very tempted, to say her own name, and state the price as her head, but he pushes aside his own desires and conveys the message he was tasked with.

"You will withdraw attention from Suna, and maintain trade," he demands. It's a vaguely worded command, but she knows what he means. He can see her go blank as she comprehends the order to stay away from his son.

"And?"

"You will surrender any knowledge you have gleamed of any nobles, state secrets, or security to my hands, and accept a seal to ensure that they remain where they belong," he follows, and this time her jaw clenches. She breathes out heavy gust of air through her nose, calculating.

"A contract. I will not have a seal placed on my person, not when I am ignorant to their inner workings," she allows.

He narrows his eyes. The contract will have to be worded in excruciating detail, but it is more than he expected. He nods in

acceptance, and she casts her eyes over Terumī, who watches them both with a veiled gaze.

"The debt is paid," the Mizukage states. "Tomorrow, you will meet with the delegation to discuss more personal matters."

"I..." She closes her mouth, and though it looks like it pains her, she nods.

The result does not please him, even as they wear out the night extrapolating on terms and definitions, stating what constitutes noble, secret, and partnership. It goes on and on and on, and even when they are done for the evening, Rasa is not pleased.

Compromise, he thinks, can only get one so far.

Zabuza finds it unsurprising that Ryuishi does not head back to the room she was assigned, and the chambers remain empty for the rest of the night. In fact, he is immensely satisfied by this fact.

Mostly because she retreats to *his* quarters instead.

Sometime after Kisame has left, and the moon is high in the night sky, she slips into his window like a renegade assassin, only instead of preparing wire or a blade to kill him, she stumbles past his window sill, grumbles something intelligible, and immediately begins to bunch up the fabric of her dress, hefting it up and off her body. Her face is already scrubbed clean, and he bets her teeth are freshly brushed as well.

He looks up from his pillow almost lazily, watching her struggle and heft the garment over her head and sling it to the ground, her movements quick and agitated. She's on edge, nervous and angry.

"My bag is to your left," he tells her, and she wordless yanks down her pants, revealing the chain wound around her long legs. She steps out of them both, dropping the weapon to the ground and

hurling the garment at his head. They land somewhere to the left of him, and he realizes that she'll probably never have good aim, but it has gotten better. This time, at least, it didn't fly out the window.

"Haku is with his cousins?" she prompts, making her way over to his bag and riffling around inside of it. He knows there are shirts inside, but it still surprises him that she always manages to find them so quickly. He never sees them, crushed to the bottom corner in some forgotten scroll.

"Spent the day with the Suna boy and the Yuki Clan," Zabuza confirms. They had been receiving a grand tour of sorts, the siblings of the jinchuuriki looking dour and put out as Haku and a few his age from the Yuki Clan wandered around the market and college districts. Gaara himself, however, looked mildly curious and stoic, taking in his surroundings with a distant, veiled appreciation.

Ryuishi barks out a laugh, unsnapping the clasps of her bra and slinging it somewhere to the side, slipping his shirt on. It's too big, too wide for her, but he likes her wearing it, despite the ill-fitting nature.

"Rasa can suck a fat one," she declare. "He can forbid me from interacting with his son-something I wouldn't even have to do if he had been a halfway competent father instead of mildly proficient Kage-but he can't stop a friendship."

Zabuza hums, slipping out from his spot, and padding toward her. She turns, looking mildly pleased with herself, and he wordlessly seizes her, hauling her upward, ignoring her squawk of protest. She kicks her heel back on his inseam, but the move has happened so many times he knows to pivot away from the stomp.

"Haku is not a tool for you to manipulate," he tells her sternly, echoing the sentiment she ingrained in him years ago.

She sputters, struggling halfheartedly as he carries her over to the bed, thrashing weakly. It's play fight, more to soothe her own ego

than anything else, light taps that barely leave bruises and soft nips with her teeth. In the spirit of the false quarrel, he hefts her up in a move that would be more showy than practical on the field, and then throws her down so hard on the mattress she bounces back up a foot or so before settling.

In mock defeat, she lies still, letting his words sink in. He knows that she didn't truly mean to word it in such a way, but he will not have her cross that line, even in theory.

She sighs after a moment, gathering her limbs up around her, nesting inside the blankets, and he watches her scarred legs kick themselves beneath the covers in satisfaction. When he was a child, he dreamed of being Mizukage with her by his side, and though things may have changed, and she is closer to any sort of Kagehood than he is, he still is pleased with how things are coming along.

"It's been a rough day," she states quietly, and he grunts, sliding in beside her. Almost immediately, her icy toes find themselves planted against his shin.

"Terumī slotted me into the seduction corp," he informs her, and she huffs out a laugh against his shoulder, twining her legs with his. They both know what the Mizukage means to achieve with such an action, and what the end results will be. Zabuzā defected once for his unit, and his loyalty lies with her before it lies with his village.

And then there is silence, but he knows she isn't sleeping. Her muscles are too tense, her breaths too quiet. She's alert and awake, on edge from it all, trying to do whatever it is she does in that head of hers while the crickets chirp peacefully in the courtyard below. The minutes tick by as she forces her breath into a familiar, even pattern, and manages to let her limbs relax. The stars outside have slowly made their way across the night sky when she speaks again, her voice heavy and tired.

"I'm sorry," she says, and he looks at her, but she hides her face from him, splaying her fingers over his pectoral and staring at them

as they trace invisible lines.

"I'm sorry for not being able to plan things out better, or keep myself in check. I'm sorry I flip between hot and cold, and that I can't actually be your yamato nadeshiko, or even..." she says, trailing off. For a moment she pauses, weary, but he doesn't interrupt.

"I wish I could be half as good to you as you are to me," she says with finality, and he doesn't like the defeat in her tone, the surrender.

"I don't care," he says abruptly, and her whole body stills, going stiff beside him. He realizes belatedly how that may have come off, and despite his reluctance, he tries to clarify.

"You're stupid and reckless. You pick fights with opponents that could obliterate you. You scheme, are emotional all the time, but I don't care. You stuck with me after the massacre. You ran, but told me to find you. You gave me a home, raised Haku, put clothes on our backs and fed us when we had nothing."

"I-"

He keeps going. He hates talking, so he's only going to do this once.

"Your plotting is annoying, and apparently you know the future. You stay loyal to people you should shun. You can never make up your mind, but I don't care. You are good to me, so I'm good to you," he forces out, feeling his tongue bumble around. It's not graceful, because he's no good with words, but he does his best.

"The way I see it, we're both monsters, but we work," he says, and really, that's what matters. She makes him... content. Makes him happy, and the when she was taken, he was the most scared he'd ever been in his life. He trained, and he watched out for Haku, but the whole time he feared that maybe one day he would never eat her food again, and that his blankets would forever be too warm. He thought that maybe the smell of her would fade from her things, and

that he'd never feel her tangle his legs with his again. And that thought was... it was heavy. Hollow and empty.

"Yeah," she agrees, and it seems to shake something inside of her, because it comes out a bit breathless and unsteady. She raises her callused palm to his neck, her body moving up to tuck her face on the other side, and he can feel her relax against him.

"Yeah, okay," she whispers again, and he can feel the way her lips brush his skin, the way her fingertips trace his jaw. She lingers there, and he holds her closer, because he can. Because he won't lose her again, he's come too close too many times as it is.

And when he's sure she's asleep, her eyes closed and breathing deep, he turns his head down to press his lips against her crown, something possessive stirring inside.

As far as he's concerned, she doesn't have anything apologize for. He doesn't particularly care about the calamity that she leaves in her wake. They are monsters, and monsters destroy. It's just in their nature.

AN: SO- I'm not dead, which is nice. Just traveling. As for this chapter, well, a lot of it is cleaning up stray plotlines. For anyone who thinks the passing of the torch to Itachi is weird, see it from Ryuishi's point of view. She's selfish, is recognizing what's best for her isn't best for everybody, and she's going to do some messed up things. It's not perfect, never will be, but she wants a piece of her goodwill to live one, even if it's not in her anymore. Also, for the reprimands made by the politicians- think of it like a rich person getting tried for a crime. It's a farce, a slap on the wrist at most, and a joke.

Thanks for all the readers still hanging in there, and for every lurkers, favoriters, and follower. A big 'hell yeah' for the messengers and reviewers who sent me check up emails and keep the flame for this story alive.

Thanks to Enbi, who is busy graduating, but still made time to edit this chapter. Bless their heart.

Three chapters left.

In Which Walls Fall and so Do Eras

I do not own Naruto.

There is a wall between them.

Obito, of course, created it as soon as he realized the strange dreams he was having were not just bleed-overs from the Void, but little excursions into her hellishly backwards mind. Honestly, what should have tipped him off is the fact that the whole thing is underwater, which, for reference's sake, is really confusing because there is no direction in this sunken madness. There is no proper up or down, west or east, only a gently stirring currents that run in channels through dimly lit, brackish water.

He's pretty wary of the whole thing. He would shut it off completely if he knew how, break the bond between them, but he can't. The best he can do is put up a block, and *still* her feelings find a way through almost everyday, no matter how much he meditates. It's honestly exhausting attempting to isolate what is him and what's her, and then attempting to overcome those things that are hers and empty them from his system. Every time he manages to let out one of her feelings, to work through it, more escape into his system. He's been trapped in the Mountains' Graveyard wrecking things and doing breathing exercises for weeks now.

At one point, when panic and irrationality bled over to the point of an attack, he tried to see if he could Mangekyō his way out of it, since his Sharingan is what got him here in the first place. Technically, her mind was connected to some sort of dimension, like his own was. Only, instead of an actual pocket dimension like Kamui provided, hers was... he hesitates to use the term 'metaphysical plane', but it's the only thing that at least kind of fits.

His body wouldn't travel there. His soul tried its best to do so.

He may have, accidentally, been a ghost for a little while after attempting to jump straight there, and then that all-encompassing Void tried to defile him. The only reason he got back is because that abyss was connected to her mind, and her mind was connected to his, and he, possibly, ran the length of both of them to get away from the emptiness.

It seemed like forever when he was pure thoughtform, trying to find his way through her tangled thoughts and memories. Even then her emotions plagued him, and he got fed up and maybe put a block in her head too, which certainly got her attention. Mostly because her eyes started bleeding, but he thinks it's entirely fair because he had to have the words 'gay nightclub' associated with Bakakashi, Hoshigaki, and the Demon of the Mist as they struggled to get through a doorway.

That's another thing. Besides the draining emotions she has, he keeps catching snippets of her thoughts and senses. Never adequate to sate his curiosity, or help figure anything out, just sufficiently interrupting his day.

As if all that wasn't enough, as if the constant feeling of being at war inside his own head didn't satisfy some cosmic punishment, he dreamt with her at times. Old memories and nonsensical journeys through winding madness, all tangled and interwoven.

He's desperate at this point, he'll admit it. He's just a tiny bit sleep deprived and hysterical, because terrors from the battlefield he can handle, mass slaughter and primal fear are not new to him. However, memories of the abyss climbing inside his soul and invading his heart, alongside faded, worn glimpses at some alien world are driving him insane.

So when he falls asleep, against his will he may add, and he finds himself with a fishing pole in his hands on some ambiguous dock, he's relieved it seems so tame. That is, until, he realizes that the surrounding forest and dock are all submerged underwater, and one of her hellish nightmare creatures swims past his head. He thinks

they might be visual representations of abstract thoughts and memories she has, but he's not going to attempt to touch one and find out.

Would you touch the bastard hybrid of a three-meter lizard with a gulper eel's head and a lionfish's fins? How would you feel if it lazily floated past, its gaping maw croaking out ' *increasing opiate production and subtly encouraging its use in Grass and Rain could lead to a replica of the Opium Wars, an effective method if one discounts to collateral damage among the civilian populace* '. Would you let its scaly, black claws anywhere near your person?

He thinks not.

This place is unsettling. It's always unsettling, and he knows she's not even awake right now, because he can count the number of the creatures stirring around in the liquid. There's a technicolor spider creature he's never heard speak, jumping around and walking crab-like among the branches of the trees, and some awful octopus demon with a old woman's face babbling on about trade lines between Kumo and Oto. Somewhere, he knows there is a winged snake with five tails sighing about love, whimsy, and the constant need to devour.

He liked it a lot better when they were faceless phantoms and shades.

The dock beneath him shakes, and he doesn't turn around, thinking it to be another abomination. He doesn't want to deal with it, cannot deal with it, but he knows that if he is forced to, he will. That's how it's worked the past few weeks, anyway.

He's surprised when it isn't a mangled thought, but a familiar woman. Her strides are even and calm, and she has a fishing pole in one hand, a box of gear in another. She strolls right up like she can't see him, like the creatures scurrying about don't bother her, and she slips off her shoes, dips her feet in the water, and starts calmly setting up her pole.

Obito gapes at her.

She threads her line through the eyelets, and skillfully picks a hook from her box, tying it with a surgeon's knot. A little bit of digging, and she manages to rustle up some sort of bait from her box, threading it on the metal with careful confidence. Her toes test the current of the sluggish estuary, and then she adds some weights. Satisfied, she twists, casting her line out far from the shore and letting the current carry it out a bit before locking her reel.

She looks so serene, so at peace. Her face is lax, and she's totally focused on manipulating her bait just right in order to catch something from the water.

Obito drops his pole like it burns his hands, and he lunges, punching her directly in the face.

She goes down hard, tumbling across the worn wooden planks with a clatter, her pole tumbling to the side. Before she can even think of getting up he throws his own pole in the water (second water? It's all water-) and scrambles over, placing a knee on either side of her of her hips and pushing her down as she tries to lean up towards his belly and wrap her arms around him, possibly to roll them both off the dock.

"This is all your fault," he seethes, grabbing her shoulder and shoving her down. She manages to jab him in the side hard enough to bruise before he grabs that hand too, pinning it across her chest.

She grunts, planting her feet flat behind him and bucking her hips, and he's startled to feel himself shift. He loses hold of her shoulder, and barely manages to grab her other wrist as he shifts the direction of the roll to avoid going off the dock, but she grapples her way to the top, shifting their positions around. He wraps his legs around her waist before she can pin him like he did her.

Her arms cannot strike, and her legs cannot reach him, but she rears forward like a snake, her head lashing forward for his neck. Her teeth

clack together inches away, and he laughs scornfully as she attempts it another two times with the same results. She may have the physical strength of an ox even in her dreams, but she can't seem to overcome the limitations of her size. She just isn't big enough to reach him.

She keeps going though, and the humor is lost. It's not funny that they are in some sort of stalemate, not when he fully intended to beat her into a pulp. As it is, they just sit their, attempting to maim each other while also not giving ground.

"Stop," he orders when she tries to shift her leg to knee him in the groin, again. He grits his teeth and attempts to roll them, but she halts him, her feet spreading for stability. "Stop, this is pointless."

The lizard lionfish swims behind her, a few meters above them both. It opens its cavernous mouth, displaying it's stiletto teeth, and one gargantuan eye stares at them both.

"Cold war is an option," it groans. "So many options..."

She pulls back, and for half a heartbeat he thinks she's going to put distance between them and fight like a real ninja instead of wrestling on the ground like a drunk civilian, but he hears her snort, then make an ugly sound in the back of her throat. He realizes with sudden dread she's gathering mucus and saliva in her mouth.

"Don't you do it," he hisses. "Don't you dare."

There is a wicked gleam in her eyes as her lips purse, and she spits directly at the eyehole in his mask.

Obito bellows, dropping his hold and flinching away so the heavy, thick globule splatters against the side of the orange disguise instead of in his eye, and he clambers away as she pounces, missing him by centimeters. She crumples arms first while he tears his mask off his face, flinging it into the distance, whirling on her while it sinks through the liquid air behind him.

" *What is wrong with you?* " he shouts, sprawled out on his back, perched on his elbows. "WHO DOES THAT?"

Her hand reaches out for his ankle, and he kicks it away while she uses the other to force herself up. She hisses when it makes solid contact.

"Me? Who the hell are *you* ? I mean, I get random punches, but who are-oh." She halts, finally turning her face upwards to look at him. He makes an appalled, enraged noise.

"What?"

"I just... I never saw your face," she says, and for a moment he thinks he's talking about the disfigurement caused by Madara grafting Hashirama's cells into him, but she quickly clarifies.

"You are *super* pale. Like, incredibly so. I'm pretty sure if I held up a piece of paper to your face it would be the same color. When's the last time you saw the sun?"

He's speechless. He realizes that they are inside her head-their head? Their shared link?-and that in here, there's no filter, but to be thinking that of all things?

He's never been more sure of his hatred and confusion before.

"Why don't you just die?" he manages finally, and this seems to amuse her, or the version of her that's in control right now, because she huffs out a breath from her nose, pushing herself up a bit further. There's a splash in the water beside them, and he catches a glimpse of webbed hands and banded skin.

"Been there, done that," she admits, before a moment of confusion crosses her face, as if she isn't sure she should have said that, or why she did. If possible, he is even more confused as the environment around them warps and shifts. The smell of a hospital fills his nose, and the splintering dock turns into cold tile. A machine

beeps in the distance, but it's warped, and his perception is thrown as if he has been drugged. The lighting is dim, and there are no windows, only a distant door and a thick curtain around them.

Her face freezes in terror, and even though she doesn't open her mouth, he can hear a scream.

Obito is frozen as the world around them falls to shreds, and a cacophonous roar echoes around them from far away. He feels his stomach rise into his throat as his heartbeat slows inside his chest. His lungs inflate slowly with stale, dry air, and the sensation of emptiness begins to creep over him.

"Don't die!" he blurts out, frantically trying to move his heavy limbs. He's so tired, so warm, the pain of everything finally numbed away. He doesn't want this dream, this nightmare, not again. "Think of something else! Safety!"

The scene morphs again, the walls sliding away like they are made of paint, and he has arms around him, holding him cold of her memory nips at his feet, brought on by the stinging frost gathering on the ground. The only reason it does not crawl on him as well is because of the companions around him.

The little bunker bed isn't comfortable, and the sleeping roll is worn and abused, threads fraying in places and riddled with holes. It offers no relief from the hard concrete, no comfort other than the barest whisper of heat, but it's large enough for all of them.

In the darkness, he glares wordlessly at Watanabe, who stares at him blank faced as they are crushed together by the larger forms on either side. He finds no pleasure in this memory of hers. Because even though he was not originally here when this event occurred, he's pressed into the situation, limbs tangled together with three other people's.

"I was hoping," he hisses, "for something a little less intimate."

"Yes, well, if you are attempting to trigger memories by association, get what you can take," she bites back coldly. He makes a disgusted face as Hoshigaki mumbles something in his sleep and drags him closer, his arm snaking around his thigh.

"This is not acceptable," he grits out.

"We were kids," she snaps. "This was after the battle with Kumo for a small group of islands near the coast. It was winter, it was cold, and somebody nearly cost Kisame his life because they didn't like us. Like hell we were sleeping alone."

"I'm changing it," he declares, and if possible, she looks even colder. She opens her mouth, most likely to remark about how her memories are sacred or how he's going to end up with something worse, but honestly, he's fine as long as he's not being groped by her unit. And maybe he can use this to figure out how she knows what she does.

"How do you-"

"When's the last time you saw Kakashi?" she blurts out, faster than he can, and he growls as he realizes that this method goes both ways.

Instead of a drip or slide, the image that comes next happens in the blink of an eye. One moment they are in some outpost in Water Country, and the next, he's sitting in a tree, watching that backstabbing traitor lay flowers on a grave he practically dug with his own hands. It's one he made with a fist wreathed in lightning, and Obito feels a fraction of the rage he did then, feels himself shaking inside the cloak Madara loaned him.

Watanabe sits beside him, watching with veiled eyes as Obito shakes in the tree branch. He sees her hand clench on the bark of the tree, crushing it in her palm, and he knows she can feel it too.

The storm rumbles around them, dark clouds hanging in a dark sky, and the drumming of thunder echoes through the night. Each raindrop seems deafening as they crash to the earth around them, slapping onto leaves and grass, foliage and tombstones.

"Happy?" he spits, and he hates her, hates her for making him relive this moment. Hates that the emotions still linger inside, festering like an infected wound.

She turns her head toward the grave as the rains beats down, soaking through her clothes and matting down her hair. She doesn't say anything in return, but there is a hint of regret inside of him that does not belong.

It's not enough. Not near enough to satisfy him, and so he reciprocates her petty revenge in equal.

"The girl with curly hair and freckles on her face. Light brown skin, high cheekbones, good form when running-"

Before he can even finish his sentence she flinches, her whole body reeling away from him. She falls off the tree branch, and the world around them tunnels, morphs into technicolor and slips away. Blonde wooden floors spread out where grass once lay, and a house constructs itself around them. Light pours in, and he catches alien trees outside of them, tangled with vines and greenery. Colorful birds leap between them, flashes of blue and red, intersped with yellow and black.

The ambient noise that replaces the steady pouring of rain is a dull hum, a symphony of bugs and birds. He smells wood smoke and spices alongside the smell of pet dander, and a lanky grey feline basks on the window sill, blinking it's eyes lazily. In the distance, dogs bark, and he watches her breath catch in her throat as she stumbles to her knees.

"Obito," she says in an empty voice. "Obito, don't do this."

He doesn't answer, watching in silence. This is the foreign place, the other, and he never gets much of these. They are hoarded and stored away, barred from his intrusion, only accessible by the woman herself.

"Cat?" calls a voice, and she stops breathing. He watches in amazement as she herself seems to change to fit the memory, her muscles sinking beneath her skin, her crop top and pants morphing into a vibrant blue sarong skirt and a tank top. The scars on her skin fade, and a sparse few take their place. This is Watanabe if she had never seen war, if she was soft and civilian.

A shadow flits through the light streaming in the window, and he knows what they are, knows them to be the abstract shades of her emotions, swarming outside as she relives this memory. He realizes that they will linger, scratching, aching to merge with the avatar of the woman before him until they take her over completely.

"Catelyn?" The voice is closer, and he winces at the sound of it, an echo of a pain that he doesn't understand.

"Yes, honey?" she chokes out, and he turns his head towards the sound of footsteps that sound from the hall. A girl peeks around the edge, chocolate eyes curious and naïve, her loose curls coming just past her shoulders. Her face shape is more classically feminine, a youth in the grasp of adolescence.

"Can you make me lunch tomorrow? Aulia said she'd bring crisps if I brought some of your Chile snapper," the girl says.

Watanabe doesn't speak, staring at the girl with such heartbreak and longing that even if Obito didn't have some sort of sympathetic bond with her, he would see it. As it is, the emotion clenches around his heart and steals the breath from his lungs. He feels such love, such overwhelming love, it makes him speechless. He realizes with sudden clarity that this isn't her own Rin, her version of a teammate worth protecting or the perfect person. This isn't her partner or crush.

This is her child.

"You could ask mom," Watanabe's voice-not husky, but a mild tenor-responds, but not from the woman herself. It's just the memory of her answer, and he wonders how many times she must have played this scene inside her head to remember it in such detail. He had the gift of sharingan to never forget, but she does not. Her memories should have degraded, faded with time, but this one is crisp, only hazy around the edges the slightest bit.

The adolescent responds flippantly in an arrogant tone that would have had her scrubbing dishes for days in the Uchiha Clan. "I mean, I could, but Aulia didn't ask for mom's. She asked for my sister's, which is basically the same thing, right? You always nag at me to do my chores and pick out clothes and you did carry me around as a baby and-"

"Mah, mah! I get it brat. You'll get your fish," the bodiless voice returns. "But you get to chop."

The girl groans as if the world is ending, rolling her eyes, but she comes out from the doorway and stomps into the kitchen to wash her hands, acting as if it's the biggest burden she's ever carried. Obito has the brief thought that maybe it is. That maybe others saw to it being that way.

And all the while, Watanabe stares at her. Her eyes never leave the girl's face as she grumbles and fumbles her way around the kitchen, opening drawers and cabinets, searching for ingredients. He doesn't feel any satisfaction, or anything other than a tiny sense of vindictive pleasure at the petty retaliation.

I was wrong, he thinks. I don't want to see this.

"Battle," he says, trying to shift the world again. The scene sticks, unchanging, and he feels apprehension inside of him. "War," he tries, and he hears the voice of that damnable fish lizard somewhere

outside, like he called it, but not the massacre or frontlines he wanted.

Watanabe doesn't move, fixated and stuck. The storm gathers, but she is frozen, her emotions raging out of control. Outside, a roar echoes, raising the hair on the back of his neck.

"Hoshigaki," he attempts, wracking his brain. "Momochi, the boy, what's his face? Show me how you know so much. Show me something humiliating about Kakashi."

The house shakes, and he groans, feeling the pressure build in the back of his head. It hurts like somebody cracked his skull against stone at the nape of his neck. Water begins to leak through the windows, flooding inside, and the noise of the scene changes. He can feel her thoughts budding out from here, growing out of control and mingling with his own. He's beginning to lose track of which pain is hers and which is his.

"Stop. Can you not be crazy for one second?" he grunts, cradling his head in his hands. "I'm going to have to put up another wall. You're breaking the first one."

His chest aches and his eye stings. He misses her, but he can't remember which her he misses, exactly. He knows he has a new goal (Akatsuki, the Tribe, Zetsu) but he can't draw the line. Everything is mixing together like a whirlpool. It's going to take days to repair it all, and he doesn't exactly have her meds to help him as their brains begin to mimic one another's chemistry.

"Wake up!" he bellows, desperate. His reflexes take over as something slams into the window, his sharingan whirring to life, and she screams as they do, finally reacting. She folds in half, clutching her head in her hands as a monster with lamprey mouths for eyes and the head of a jackal slams into the window, howling in grief.

He shouts, and she shrieks, their eyes swollen and leaking blood, the world crumbling around them. He can hear Madara's voice

droning on as his memories begin to mingle freely with Orochimaru's, each feeling they share dragging up associated memories inside of them.

There is a ghost of a girl with brown hair and wide eyes, the feelings of love and loss, grief and understanding. A beacon torn away as everything churns and violence overtakes them. Rage warps and overcomes, and a monster battles with a family curse.

Rin, he thinks.

Selene, she echoes.

Ryuishi feels a jolt in her gut, sickening and unpleasant. The sensation is accompanied by a throbbing in her head, a constant and excruciating pressure just behind her eyes, stretching all the way back to the nape of her neck. She smells the iron tang of blood, feels the moisture of it on her face, and knows with sudden clarity that she is going to make Uchiha Obito her personal bitch.

She attempts to speak, but her words come out muffled and strangled, wet in a way they aren't supposed to be. A tickle in the back of her throat tells her that she's aggravated old scar tissue, or maybe her nose is bleeding as well. It hurts, but it's nothing in comparison to her migraine.

Behind her Zabuza shuffles around, and she feels him come in closer from the edge of the bed, where he most likely shifted in his sleep, but the warm hand that cups her waist and then slides across her belly isn't what she's looking for. She's not cold, she's fucking falling apart because some Sharingan-wielding psychopath is inside her fucking head.

(She may also be a bit cold, but. Priorities.)

"Z'b'za," she forces out, feeling like she's eaten ten kilos of sand. Her throat is raw, wet, and itchy.

He grunts, taking it as an order and shifting closer, making her want to scream. She doesn't need a cuddle. She needs a doctor.

"Help," she manages to rasp finally, and he pauses, his hand clutching tighter. He slowly seems to register her words, sitting up behind her. She can barely see, the world tinted red and her eyes squinted shut to block out the little light there is. Dawn hasn't even come yet, a few hours away or so judging by her internal clock, but what little glow there is painful.

That, at least, seems to make him stir. He leans over her, using his hold to push her onto her back, and he takes in her visages with a sort of sleepy, aggravated calm.

And then he flares out his chakra like the damn world is ending.

It rushes over her, violent, thick, and malignant. It clouds over her senses like a blanket, until all she can feel is the demonic mass around him, enveloping her. It's painful, true, because her head hurts and sensing something like this stimulates a part that she would have liked to leave unabused, but it's also comforting.

There's knocking at the door, and Zabuza barks something at it that makes her ears want to bleed alongside her eyes. It opens swiftly, then closes just as fast, and then he's shuffling around, using the blankets as makeshift rags, smearing blood across her cheeks.

Outside, a frantic Chōjūrō sprints his way to the Mizukage's quarters, his heart thumping in his chest, his face on fire. He didn't mean to walk in like that, but Momochi-senpai flared his chakra, and Chōjūrō was on watch-

There was blood. Blood and Momochi-senpai barking orders to find a medic, but there are no medics nearby, only Terumī-dono. She'll know what to do.

He rushes through the halls, pushing himself until he spots Ao, who sits stone-faced outside her quarters. Chōjūrō pants, motioning

wordlessly with his hands while the other man stares down at him, his face twisted in disgust.

"Boy, speak," Ao orders, and Chōjūrō inhales a gulp of air.

"M-Momochi-san and The L-Lady of Oto, blood. Medic-"

Ao smiles. It's a dark, twisted thing. "The boy moves fast," he comments, crossing his arms and widening his legs. "No need to worry, boy, a little blood in the bedroom would be natural for a man like him. Momochi is just fulfilling orders."

Chōjūrō balks at the implications. He knows Ao is from an older generation, and Momochi-senpai is too, but the callousness of that statement is jarring none the less.

"It's from her eyes," Chōjūrō protests, and Ao seems to be working on more worrying explanations when the door opens and Terumī-dono steps out from her quarters, hair loose, but otherwise dressed and ready.

"Chōjūrō, find the one of the Kaguya in the west wing and tell them to alert the Otokage," she orders, her voice nothing but cold steel and grace, commanding compliance.

Chōjūrō snaps his mouth closed and bows quickly before darting off again, the large sword on his back jostling awkwardly. He's still a bit small for its size, but his master is gone, and he is one of the last carrying a long legacy. He's proficient, and learning fast, sure to make a fine jounin one day.

Until then, she's stuck with Ao, a member of the older generation she allows to remain in power, and man she knows only respects her because she can dominate him on the battlefield. He's useful, able to relate with those who adhere to the rigid traditions and old ways, but he's also constantly waiting for an opportunity to turn back the clock and re-institute the strict hierarchy and mercilessness of Kiri's past.

He gives her an unimpressed look, and she gives him one that could boil water. He attempts to outlast her, but he knows in his heart that she could wipe him from the face of the earth in an instant.

"It's probably nothing," he demurs, turning away. "Momochi's a healthy man, and Chōjūrō probably got confused by the lighting. Just a little roughness-"

"You will keep your mouth *shut*," she orders fiercely, her tone brooking no argument. "I did not ask for any of your theories, Ao. I know you are skilled enough to have felt the flare that woke me, and yet you did nothing. We will go, we will ensure the health and safety of everyone involved, and you will keep your opinions to yourself."

He grits his jaw, but bows his head and follows her as she begins to walk down the halls. He knows the Mizukage's warnings, knows that the pseudo-progressive, power hungry little girl hates the old guard of Kirigakure with a special sort of passion, the same way he hates her.

He also knows that he has just been informed that she is in bed with one of the Seven Swordsmen, and by all rights, she should be property of Kiri now. As she should have been the whole time, if not for her treachery.

Quite frankly, a little blood is nothing to him. Ao would see her quartered in the streets if Kirigakure didn't need her money.

The Mizukage seems to disagree though, and she closes in on Momochi's chambers with an intense focus, not even knocking as she opens the door. Ao respects that sort of display, asserting her dominance effortlessly.

"I heard there was a situation," she states, and Ao lingers at the doorway as she invites herself inside. Momochi doesn't say anything, looking up to acknowledge her presences, a fist full of stained sheets in his hands. Technically, it's not a lot of blood, but the fact that it seems to be streaked across the her face and the

blankets of the room is unsettling, especially when the woman smiles, her snaggle teeth stained pinkish.

"Mei," she hisses, her voice cracked and shot. She won't open her eyes, but her head is turned to them both anyway, as if she can sense them by hearing alone.

"What happened to Terumī-san?" the Mizukage says, and Ao is shocked to see her guard go up. She's wary of the other woman, even as disabled as she appears. Ao immediately follows suit, watching them both for signs of attack.

The woman mouths something, seems to realize there is no voice behind it, then coughs to clear her throat, but the Mizukage halts her, interrupting before she can begin.

"No need to answer. I can guess," she says, thinking of the strain between Watanabe and the Kazekage. It was merely a show, then, for the conservative man's benefit.

Watanabe nods, then grits her teeth, as if the action of moving her head pained her greatly. The swordsman she's leaning on grips her more tightly, holding her upright, using his chest as a backrest. It's a cue of intimacy, but looking at them, Ao wonders. The room doesn't hold many clues, other than her clothes that seem to be cast around, and the two adults do not seem sated, but aggressive and anticipatory. Their skin isn't bruised or blemished, and there are no telling odors. Ao narrows his eyes. The mission isn't as fulfilled as he thought, then.

"Where is-"

Any words Momochi might say are cut off as the sound of rumbling overtakes it, the ground shivering beneath them. Ao stumbles, and the Mizukage whips her head to the window. There are no flashing lights against the night skies, no blooms of red and yellow, but everyone in the room is familiar enough to know an explosion when they hear one.

Watanabe sucks in a breath, her hand fisted tight on Momochi's arm, and she bares her teeth as she forces herself away from him. She opens her eyes, though the action visibly pains her, and Ao finds himself respecting that grit just the littlest amount. He may not like her, but only a true born-and-bred Kiri ninja would begin looking for a fight when their eyes are hemorrhaging. She looks fearsome, jet black cornea against garnet sclera, flaking blood smeared across her cheeks.

"Clothes," she rasps, pushing herself upward, searching for said articles. Terumī helpfully stoops down to pick up said garments and hands them over, watching at the other woman stuff them on with no shame. The Ao Dai is wrinkled, but usable, and she wraps her arms with her meteor hammer, making her way toward the window. In the distance, an alarm begins, its tone resonating deep and climbing higher.

The ground rumbles again, and this time light accompanies it, a blossom of curling fire from the north. Ao feels his heart pick up pace as the lady stumbles, flinching away from the noise and color, but in an instant Momochi is up, steadying her, the Greatsword Kubikiribōchō being strapped to his back.

"The Lab Archives," she hisses.

"An accident, perhaps?" the Mizukage volunteers, but everyone in the room knows that is a farce. Already, Ao can hear people begin to flood out of their rooms and take to the halls. In moments, they will either head to shelters or to their leaders, following the procedures set forth in case of attack.

"The civilians... *Haku* -" She coughs, unable to continue, and Momochi grips her shoulder tighter, his hands flashing through seals. A clone erupts from a cloud of smoke and takes off as she lifts her leg and plants it on the window sill.

"Ao and I will assist in any operations we find. I take it all forces unsure of their commands should be directed toward assisting

evacuation and defense?" Mei asks, and Watanabe nods, turning to look back just once before she leaps.

"Red cloud cloaks... enemies," she manages vaguely, her voice scratchy. "Minimal collateral. Safe points underground."

Mei nods, and directs Ao with a hand movement. He has no doubt they will be going to collect Chōjūrō before any operations begin, and that Momochi will remain with the other woman for one reason or another.

"Good luck," she says, and Watanabe smiles, wide and hungry.

"Good hunting," she returns, and Ao huffs out a laugh through his nose despite himself.

She leaps, Momochi at her side, and he is reminded why the Kiri no Kaijuu were so feared on the battlefield the moment their chakra erupts in the night, spilling over as beacons to the soldiers around them. He can't help but stare as they slide into sync, footsteps falling together, the taller man cutting back to compensate for his injured partner. It makes him wonder if the mission is even necessary, or if it's just a formality at this point.

Treacherous and deceitful she may be, and Momochi may have sympathies that run deeper than Ao first suspected, but they are Kiri to their bones.

The dawn is coming.

Kisame doesn't mean that poetically, in the sense of the Akatsuki or a new age or anything. He means the literal dawn, the sunrise, the light of day. He's draped in some stolen cloak that barely passes his waist, too narrow at the shoulders by far, and his face is shrouded by a hood and a makeshift mask. He doubts that anyone who knows him will be fooled, but the point isn't fooling the people he knows, it's

not showing his face so there can be at least a little bit of doubt about his presence here tonight.

The sword is a little bit of a give away, but he's not about to leave it behind, not when Samehada has been by his side longer than any person. He trusts in it the way he trusts a good tool, to be as useful as he makes it, to do the job it's supposed to.

The streets are packed, and units are forming into squads, numbers of ninja herding people through the streets to shelters. He sees a whole platoon take off across the rooftops and begin to spread out along the walls, halting any traffic and shutting down the gates. Nobody is getting in or out of this mess without going through a small army worth of fighters, and nobody is getting to the merchant district without doing the same.

Unfortunately, if Kisame is right, the attackers may have planned for that.

He snarls, pushing himself faster, wondering where the hell Itachi went, and why he put his hair up in a bun before he left. He's going to take some time to ask those questions later, but right now, he's closing in on two particular signatures heading for the source of the explosion.

Ahead of them, another two spill out in such mass it takes his breath away, and then there is a cloud of smoke so large he thinks it must belong to a boss summons. Only, there's not one giant creature erupting from the night, but hundreds of smaller ones. Snakes, all small enough to fit on the streets without crushing buildings, begin to show up more frequently the closer he gets to his unit, and funnily enough, there are toads intersped with them as well. The creatures seem ill at ease with each other, and he thinks he hears two boulder sized fighters threatening each other as they work together to secure a wagon full of goods.

He tries his best to avoid people, but he's only so good, and the streets are filled. It says something about the discipline of the ninja,

and the faith they have in the Otokage that any pursuit is left to the summoned creatures.

"Same-san!" someone yells, and he recognizes the tone. It's urgent, and he feels the time running out as he flits past. The boy and his siblings aren't hard to pick out as he rushes past them, hefted high on clouds made of sand, making a target of themselves.

"Get to the shelters!" he barks, and the blond girl nods, though whether or not she follows the order, he never figures out.

"Protect Aneue," the red-head orders in turn, and he grins, because that boy has death in his eyes, daring Kisame to question him. It's not like the swordsman had many other plans at the moment. Just protect the unit, like old times.

A group catches up to the duo, chakras flaring, and he's forced to slow his gait as the platoon receives its orders before jumbling into smaller groups, sectioning outward. He smells the sharp tang of blood in the night, and he catches the sight of a group led by a bone wielding Kaguya boy, all of them bleeding from their arms. As if it was some sort of contest, the chuunin kid with six arms is bleeding from three of them, being chewed out by a red headed girl.

He knows he's reaching the explosion site, because the population begins to thin out some, and the streets are filled with rubble that has rained down from the sky. His senses tell him that his unit has finally found the people who summoned all the creatures-Jiraiya and Orochimaru, judging by the species of the animals.

But then another flares, stronger than he can ever recall it being, and he panics, pushing himself as fast as he can go. Zetsu never surged like that before, never pushed himself. As far as Kisame knew, Zetsu was strictly an intelligence agent, able to hold his own in a fight, but never like this. Never containing this sort of power.

He makes it to one of the last standing buildings on the border of a crater where the explosion went off. The first, he guesses, looking

around the scene, was probably deliberate, made in order to destroy an enemy or distract them. The second most likely came from the gas lines that ran through the laboratories, ignited by an errant spark or ember from the first.

But that's all the time he has to analyze, because the ground shakes, and two figures blur in the basin below. Kisame is actually in awe, because he knew Orochimaru was good, knew he had probably even gotten better over the years, but he's slithering circles around a horde of Zetsu. Jiraiya is following suit, attempting to leapfrog his way to the center of them, where the original black and white abomination is seated, a scroll furled open, his hands flying through seals. Kisame spots Zabuza and Ryuishi racing down towards the hoard from behind, flanking the mass, but the figure in the center shouts something and slams his hand on the ground.

There's a rush that shivers through the air, cold and hollow. It washes over his senses like oil, slick and heavy, and he knows that the laws of nature are being broken, but he also realizes that this is familiar. It's the taint from Ryuishi's chakra, magnified, pure of anything else. It makes him remember an endless emptiness, a hunger that stretches forever, transcending time and space.

Below, Zabuza shouts and lunges, and Kisame is filled with panic because the coffin that appears from the earth rises at the same moment Ryuishi falls to the ground.

AN: So, last bit of the last arc. Things that went ignored festered and grew, because nobody should forget Zetsu ever, especially not when they've pushed him in a corner. (Also, Zetsu's pronouns changed about seventy billion times in the coming chapter. Hopefully fixed, but be on the lookout.) Obito and Ryuishi kinda met in the spirit world and then bled together into Ryubito. Or Watachiha. Or Obishi. Metaphysical nonsense for reasons. No, Ryuishi is not going to get the sharingan, and No, whatever else. This is happening to bring the story to a bit of a climax point, affecting the greatest number of people possible.

Shout out to lurkers, favoriters and followers. A big shout out to my reviewers, who have kept this story going for so long.

Many thanks to my beta Enbi, who edits for me. Check out thier story 'For Thine is a Kingdom'. The times jumping is strange and dream-like, a quality I am a huge fan of.

Two chapters left.

In Which Everything is a Mess

I do not own Naruto. TW for blood, gore, battle, mentions of past drug use, death, and cannibalism. Also, POV whiplash

Ryuishi isn't sure when, exactly, she pinpointed she was fucked. It's kind of hard, but she's going to say that surprisingly enough, it wasn't the moment she woke up pantsless, bleeding from her face holes. Nor was it the moment Terumī Mei, bodacious babe of the century, walked in on her in said pantsless state with her dour faced guard, and offered help while Ryuishi tried to keep Obito and herself separate in her head. It was probably a little afterward, after the fresh wash of rage coursed through her veins as she saw the population evacuating the streets, and the Sound Four-Five, whatever-informed her and Zabuzza that Mokuton-wielding abomination of nature had been found in the lower labs, and was currently engaged in battle with Orochimaru-

Nevermind. That's the moment.

She had immediately felt like she wanted to puke, because seriously, fuck Zetsu. Fuck Zetsu who probably had taken advantage of the hordes of refugees flooding into Rice, for not even allowing her the time to slip on a bra. Fuck him sideways, because they had been checking as hard as they could, but somebody who could use plant roots to travel and had a hate boner for her the size of Kumo's giant, phallic Raikage tower could not be stopped by mere things like physics and ninja TSA.

"Bleed," she had rasped, and bless his heart, Kimimaro didn't even hesitate to take one of his own bone swords to his shoulder. The rest behind him followed suit, and she had only been mollified when she verified that it wasn't a genjutsu and they didn't bleed white goo.

"Everyone bleeds. If it's white, destroy them. If they wear a red cloud cloak, destroy them. Inform the ranks, and check everyone," she had ordered, and they had nodded before flitting away, little speedy blurs on the rooftops.

And then, as if to rub salt into her already bleeding eyes, Ryuishi had to push herself past the ruins of the streets she helped build. True, the blast radius wasn't enormous, only few city blocks, and most the labs were empty, but she hated and mourned with equal passion as she leapt through the rubble, Zabuza's hand steadying her, suddenly understanding why a place could mean so much.

She had stood shoulder to shoulder with the masons and brick layers. She had mortared and stacked, sweating in the sun beside the residents. She had been in these labs when a civilian scientist had re-invented bandages with clotting agents, had clapped when Orochimaru revealed that he had made an alternate form of antiseptic with a longer shelf life that would help save hundreds across the countries.

This wasn't her home, wasn't her house, but it was her city. She loved it, had helped carved it from the earth with her hands. Had dug the first trenches and set the sidewalks. She had seen it turn reluctant sex workers into scientists, and hardened criminals into family guardians. Otogakure was the best of her old world mixed with the technology and culture of this new one. The food, the cultures, the style and progress, all of it was under attack.

But it didn't end there. No, she had to stumble upon what could possibly amount to a nightmare come to life.

Zetsu with the Edo Tensei Scroll, pinned down by Jiraiya and Orochimaru, who just need a little more time to wear down the white clones and tear them apart. Time that she could already tell they weren't going to get.

And yes, she knows that scroll, knows that Orochimaru made it. She's not stupid enough to think he would just give up something

that piqued his interest. In fact, she banked on that with her whole life. One could say that his habit of tending to his curiosities is the only reason she is still breathing, because she is one of them.

It was probably stupid of her then, to not realize that Orochimaru would connect the pieces however he saw fit. That he would combine his research, and use the one link to death he had to perfect his technique of raising the dead. He had all the research he could want in her chakra samples, her blood and bone, and the years he had spent training and studying her in equal measure. Honestly, he probably used her to help polish his spiritual possession as well, and her connection to the Void most likely helped him achieve his horcrux/body swap immortality.

So there she is, doubly fucked, only realizing that it's compounded when the Void inside her sings out to the cosmos. Tendrils of nothing writhe inside her gates like eels, flooding her. The mess of the combined thoughts in her head peaks in sharp terror as the nothingness reaches out, called forward by the technique.

(And Orochimaru, who notices her tumble down the side of the crater, feels only the faintest and most distant satisfaction. It springs from having a hypothesis proved, because yes, there need not be any sacrifice to bridge the gap between life and death, not when one is already provided in the form of a living dead woman.)

Ryuishi has enough time to feel her soul, that tiny ember of herself, quiver in fear before she gags out a scream, or what would be a scream, if she had the throat for it. What she manages is a coughing, retching sort of noise, pitched high in surprise and horror.

And Obito, in her head, shrieks along with her. Only he's louder, and his will is stronger than her own in this moment. He jerks control away from her briefly, tangles her legs and runs from the Void, trying to escape to his own mind.

The sound of her dropping and skidding down the face of the basin wall is almost drowned out by Zabuza's roar, which would hurt her

head, but she feels numb. Tired, exhausted even, like she's inches away from the worst kind of sleep.

The sound, however, draws the attention of the monster in the middle of monsters. She makes eye contact with black Zetsu, who grins at her in delight, seated down to perform the technique. She can barely see him through the legs of his clones and Orochimaru and Jiraiya darting about, but it's like he wants her to see him. He tilts his head just right, catching the glow of a distant flame, and there is a rush of recognition that sweeps over her numbed senses.

The Rinnegan, she realizes in muted horror. Zetsu has a single Rinnegan.

Obito's response is instantaneous, his thoughts methodically sliding together. A battle in Ame between him, Zetsu, Konan, and all the paths. A weakened state, still enough to crush Zetsu and chase him away, but not until after he stole back an eye.

Zabuza is grabbing her by the back of her dress, hauling her up and out of the way of Jiraiya, who attempts to cover the whole group in oil. Orochimaru is already breathing out the first tongues of flame from a Katon jutsu, but the hive-minded clones conglomerate over the coffin and caster, protecting them from the flame.

Someone in her head wonders how many people Zetsu had to consume to create this many clones. How many corpses had to be made to feed this little attack on her city, but then the white, goopy remains begin to slough off the abomination in the center, who stares at her arrogantly as she feels her heart begin to slow.

Zabuza shakes her, screams something in her ear, but she feels like she's high. Like her veins are full of morphine, and the darkness between the stars calls her, reaching into her very being.

She's scared, terrified of it still, but not as much as she used to be. Death, she knows, comes for everybody, and she's no exception. The Void will call her back again at some point in the future, she

knows this, but she still has to talk to Kakashi, and she has yet to see her children grow. Gaara and Haku are out there somewhere in the village, among the chaos, and Zabuza and Kisame are just beginning to speak with each other again. She has to hunt down the tribe, and make sure Itachi can not only carry her legacy, but thrive as a person when he does.

She breathes in, feeling the rush of cool morning air against her abused throat, feels the sting of scrapes along her skin from her fall. She pours herself into staying awake, into forming her chakra as Zabuza bats off a clone with a vindictive amount of force.

Ryuishi bares her teeth at Zetsu as the coffin door opens, and she knows who it is even before the bastard steps free. Both she and Obito know who he will call upon, know who Zetsu would turn to if things went sour in his plans.

The Void thrums and time seems to halt as Uchiha Madara steps free of the hands of death, his skin pale and blemish free, his Sharingan already active. He's tall and statuesque, like some old pagan god, his hair wild and his armour dusty from the tomb, but his eyes; his eyes are like fire and death. They sweep around unsettlingly fast, crimsons blurs on his face, and the moment his foot touches the rubble, he seems to understand his situation.

Ryuishi can't look away.

She stares in silent fear, feeling his chakra surge unlike anything she's ever felt before. It's so powerful, so overwhelming, and the Void is in him as it is in her. Like a leech, he consumes her chakra, siphoning it through the abyss. She can literally feel her energy draining out of her body and into his. He grows more powerful every second, escaping death through her tainted energy, using her spark to ignite himself.

"Shit," breathes Jiraiya, who came here to spy on his teammate, not fight a legend. " *Shit* ."

It's uncanny how nobody moves, how everyone stills while they reassess the situation. Even Zabuza stiffens up, and she's left the only one not prepared, still feeling the echo of the high she died from and the rush of the Void in her. Her eyelids are heavy, her mouth dry and tongue clumsy, and she's nowhere near where she needs to be to fight.

"The boy is dead?" Madara asks, his voice like the night sky, deep and forever.

Obito laughs bitterly inside her head, because of course he's that arrogant. Of course Madara would think that Obito would have to be dead before he figured it out, and Obito feels hatred so strong and pain so deep it makes *her* snarl, drawing Madara's attention.

"He was lead astray," Zetsu answers, and she weakly bares her teeth at them both. She's never been on this side of a Sharingan before, and the lazy spin of the tomoe is mesmerizing, holding her attention. It's only Obito's will overriding her own that saves her, but she feels cold rage because of it. She detests the small act of submission, would rather tear at everything than avert her eyes, even as tired as she is.

"That one," Madara says, staring her down.

"Abomination of an enemy, a liar and mistake," Zetsu growls, quick to affirm her place as a deceiver and paint her as a target.

Madara lifts his chin, and the very act is menacing, taunting and derisive. She narrows her eyes at the ground, and inside, she feels fear like she's never known. She is an ant compared to the strength of the Sannin, a flea when measured against the likes of the upper echelons of the Akatsuki. Against someone like Madara, she is a speck of dust.

Worse, Zabuza is beside her, and she knows he would fare poorly as well.

"Dead," Madara says, declares, and the statement holds a weight, a certainty like no other. It rings through the rubble with finality.

"No," she says, forcing the words out, hearing herself in third person. "Not."

"Soon," he promises. "Again."

Zabuza snarls, and that seems to unfreeze everything. Almost at once, Orochimaru is behind Madara, taking advantage of his distraction. She has a split second to realize that Orochimaru came through a mirror of all things, which means he's wearing a Yuki host body for reasons unknown, before Zabuza tugs her back and Zetsu begins to retreat as well. Jiraiya rushes forward the moment they try to run, utilizing a surprising amount of dexterity to attack the plant man, who goes down pretty hard once the Jiraiya's weird hair jutsu stabs through him several dozen times. Unfortunately, he won't stay down. He's a bastard alien manifestation without organs. They can poke holes in him all day but *he just won't die*.

Ryuishi is stuck, trying to figure out how to breathe, how to fight the Void seizing inside of her, how to deal with Obito's thoughts mingling with her own. Her mind is crashing, and not in the chaotic, breaking to pieces kind of way, but just the slow cessation of self. As she watches three extraordinary fighters combat each other, all she can think is that she expedited the process of it all. Made it faster, more efficient. Brought all the pretty little problems to a head, and added a heap more on top.

Her head moves slowly, fighting against the morphine that doesn't exist inside her veins, struggling with the death she died once already, the one that still lingers inside her soul. Obito fights with every ounce of his will, refusing to submit.

Madara is a god, they think together. A legend given flesh and youth again. Made whole by unnatural means. He can destroy armies in minutes, devastate battlefields and countries. He is danger.

I don't want to die, Obito admits inside the safety of his mind, and she hears it echo in hers. He recoils from the Void, flares high and hot, burning it away. He is frantic trying to keep it at bay, keep them away from it.

We won't, she assures him, but that ember of her, small and barely glowing, turns into water. It washes forward, and she feels the chakra inside of her plummet even though she's yet to use a single technique. Obito thinks a thousand things as she reaches out to the Void, welcoming it into herself.

She doesn't know what she's trying to do, maybe tug the connection and pull herself and Madara back where they came from, giving Jiraiya and Orochimaru the opening to destroy Zetsu once and for all. Obito will get pulled in as well, but she accepts that, just as she accepts the consequences of her actions.

She never does figure out what she was planning though, because like a sign, another chakra surges from the lip of the basin, coming in fast. Water, in great, gushing amounts, the likes of which she only wishes she could create, comes flooding into the battlefield. She watches Zetsu get swept underneath it, sees Jiraiya yelp and frantically start leaping while Orochimaru and Madara, a tangle of ice and fire, collide with a wall of it.

Thoughts leave her, and she manages to latch her limbs around Zabuza before the crushing force of thousands of kilos collides over them. Decades of instinct take hold, and she holds her breath right before the current slams into them. The sheer power of it is astounding, threatening to pummel her body into dust, break her limbs against the ground, and bury her under debris.

But the water is her home. It has been, always will be, and she knows to let herself go, to submit to the force instead of fight it. It blasts them both back, tumbles them a thousand times, and she feels Zabuza's hands clutch at her with a trust she doesn't deserve. He has faith in her skills, knows that this is her domain, never doubts for a second that she can carry them both through it.

And she cannot give up. Cannot forsake someone who believes in her to such an extent. Ryuishi shudders, floating in a drugged-up state, freeing her limbs from his body and using them to twist and flow with the current. She picks her way through the agitated, angry waters, forcing her limbs to move despite how heavy they seem, ignoring the drag of her thoughts and the weight of both Zabuza's solid muscle and his ridiculous sword.

Disoriented, she has to let air escape her mouth to figure which way is up. The bubbles slip against her cheek like the world's strangest caress, and she follows them towards the surface. Her lungs may have been trained to withstand this, but the pressure of this depth is ear popping, and Zabuza hasn't groomed his body for this environment.

She struggles, and each stroke of her arms seems to span a thousand years as the abyss howls inside her heart, reaching through her eight gates and filling her up as the chakra is leeched. She can feel the numbness growing, tangling inside of her limbs. Her ears are filled with muffled silence, all noise muted by the rampaging water, only interrupted by the beating of her own heart.

She fights, struggling with her environment, moving as much as she can without breaking, bending and twisting to make her way to the top. She carries everything with her, the weight of the memories crashing inside her head, the sins of both her and Obito, and the love and faith of Zabuza, and she doesn't halt, doesn't even pause until she makes her way to the surface, clamoring for breath.

Zabuza ascends, his hands using her shoulder to prop himself up, and he gulps down air like it's the best thing he's ever tasted. He doesn't even look at her as he channels chakra to his palms and climbs to the surface of the water, sword ready by his side.

"Zetsu," she rasps, Obito echoing her. "He's mine."

"Stay alive," he orders, and he feels the ripples of her diving back down, hunting for her prey.

A dome emerges in the center of the newly created lake, and Zabuza can sense Kisame soaring through the air, aiming straight for it. For a moment, he is twelve again, and there is harmony in the world as their chakra's peak on the battlefield. This is what the Kaijuu know. What they were made for. More than any house on a beach, the battlefield is their home.

He darts forward, feels Jiraiya do something strange and otherworldly with his own chakra as he mirrors Zabuza to the right, heading for the center conflict.

A shriek, angry and raw pierces the night, and Zabuza has the briefest thought that Ryuishi will be upset that Madara just cut Orochimaru in half, but the Otokage bursts into hundreds of serpents that rain down on his enemy, hissing and venomous. Madara sneers something Zabuza can't hear as they bite at him, writhing and vile, and then the air around him explodes. A great, towering giant made of chakra with four arms engulfs the Konoha founder, blasting everything around him away.

(Isn't that just like a Konoha nin, though? Some ridiculous chakra manifestation, as overpowered as it is showy. How is he gonna assassinate anybody discreetly with a thirty meter tall glowing avatar?)

Kisame lands directly on it's head, his chakra eating sword tearing away at the construct, but one great arm reaches up to fling him away as if he's nothing more than an annoying mosquito, and somewhere, disgustingly enough, Orochimaru is vomited out of the mouth of a snake, a legendary blade in his hand.

Kusanagi, Zabuza thinks in astonishment, watching in near apoplectic rage as the Otokage throws his sword like a dagger at Madara. A sword like that should be respected, should be cherished, is worth seven countries and a hundred partners-

Madara catches it, and Zabuza has never been less amused.

The only saving grace is that the Uchiha ancestor doesn't hold it for long. Bladed chains emerge from below him, wrapping around his arms, forcing him to stagger and drop the weapon into the brine. His expression is unchanging as he widens his stance, and then pulls on the chains with enough force to cause shock waves to ripple from the water below him. Ryuishi rockets out of the water, and he knows she's squinting just to see, but it makes her look ferocious, her eyes bloodshot and bleeding, her teeth bared from the force it takes to hold onto the weapon.

Madara twists his arms at the apex of her flight, and she tugs the chains the same moment he does. Zabuza barely has time to register horror and fear as Uchiha Madara is ripped from the surface of the water, flung directly at his much, much weaker partner. His only relief comes when the man spears his leg through her chest, and she explodes into droplets of water, no more than a Mizu Bunshin.

"Below! You can only get through his Susanoo from below!" Jiraiya shouts, and Zabuza feels a thrill run down his spine. This isn't the lackadaisical, grumpy pervert from before. This is the legend on the field. This is the man that went down in history for winning a war with his team, and Zabuza is fighting beside him.

Kisame, it seems, is back on the field, taking this message to heart. He roars, his absurdly tiny cloak and slapdash mask making him look ridiculous as he pumps his chakra out and summons his sharks. They boil in the water around him for a moment, unsure, but Zabuza spots a bronze hand, sees it touch one of them on the nose, precariously close to a mouthful of teeth. He knows it's just a clone, but the sharks follow none the less, cutting a path directly to the base of the giant.

Madara flips himself around mid air, using some ridiculous fuuton technique, and he uses the meteor hammer still in his hands to devastating effect. He lashes out as Jiraiya emerges from beneath, his pupils slanted sideways, two decrepit-looking toads on his shoulders.

In another time, another life, Zabuza could have watched them go on for hours, feeling the hot stir of violence in his blood, but now is neither the time nor place. Orochimaru is already going to back up the hermit, and Zabuza catches a flash of black and white writhing on the surface for a few moments, striking at something tugging it from below.

He sprints, sword ready to lop off the head presented as many times as needed. The movement catches the eye of Kisame, who jerks his head to that point following after, but Zabuza knows his brother is on the other side of the field. Zabuza will get there first.

Zetsu struggles in the liquid, and though he has no true need to breathe, the water makes his movements strange. The physics of it negates much of his strength, and the little monster on him keeps writhing around, a blurry shape he can only see because of her white of the ao dai flashes in the murky water like silver scales, and he lines up another shot, baring his teeth.

The blade that severs White's arm is almost a complete surprise. It means little in the span of things, because it is nothing to regrow an arm, but it does distract him long enough for the little whore to slide up his body while her henchman slips in to strangle him from behind, the blade of his sword fitting around the hollow of Zetsu's neck.

Black'll admit that if he were as weak and pathetic as a human, he would be scarred, but they are Zetsu. They cannot die.

Watanabe surfaces, and he laughs to see the state she is in. Madara hasn't even been in battle for two minutes, and she hasn't even fought much, and yet she is wounded.

"What will you do?" White asks, delighted. "You going to kill me? Think that's going to work? How many of us are there, how many clones and-"

She opens her mouth wide, eyes cold, and White sucks in a breath he doesn't need. She moves with ice cold determination, and she

doesn't go for his throat, but Black's face, where the Rinnegan lies.

It's a bad angle, and her teeth just barely miss the orb, but she doesn't stop. Zetsu howls as she bites down, her snaggle teeth sinking into the boneless flesh of his cheek, her jaw clamping down like a dogs as she tears a piece of him away.

"You bitch!" Black wails, and White knows that he can heal, and that as soon as she spits it out that Black can remake himself.

Only she doesn't. She chews once, her eyes blank and glassy, pupils blown wide. Tendrils of black writhe inside of her mouth, squirming between her teeth and causing her cheeks to bulge, but she pays them no mind. Another lethargic, lackadaisical chew, and then she swallows the piece of Black, never mind how freakish the action is.

White shouts in unison with Black as she goes in for another bite, hurling insults. He slips against the blade, melting into it, unworried about the anatomy he doesn't have in his desperation to get away. He regrows his arm, jerks it around unnaturally before the swordsman behind him grabs the limb and tears it off with brute, chakra-enhanced strength.

Twice she repeats the maneuver, trying to get a grip on his wet body in an attempt to reach the eye. Her fingers fumble, clumsy, as if drugged, but she is steadily growing closer, swallowing bits and pieces of Black as she goes. And Zetsu... he is scared. He's never had this happen, never been this close, never had an opponent attempt to *consume* them before.

And it should be fine. He would be able to escape, but the root system is far beneath the water, and the swordsman behind them keeps them pinned. He holds them still, maiming them as they try to escape her frightful jaws.

"Madara!" White howls as her fat, stupid fingers finally catch the ridge of his maimed cheek, sinking in for the eye. "MADARA!"

In the distance, Madara finally breaks free of the two fighting him, and Kisame watches in dread as the revived man rushes toward his unit, the his expression blank. The swordsman doesn't care about the old toad sage, battered and twisted in an odd angle, or Orochimaru hefting him up. All he can see is the way Madara leaps and lands behind his unit, the way he grabs Zabuza around his neck with one hand, and uses the end of Ryuishi's meteor hammer to pierce him through the heart.

Time seems to dilate, stretching out forever. He sees her knuckles sink into Zetsu's face, watches Zabuza's blood pour out of him as Madara hefts him high in the air by his throat. The memory will linger inside his head forever, one teammate run through, the other dazedly waiting to be next.

Her, cold, bleeding eyes widened in surprise and terror as something wet and warm spatters against her cheek. The tendrils of black on her tongue wriggle and squirm as Zetsu stills, her fingers dug deep into his eye.

"Z'Buza," he hears her rasp weakly, half of the black running down her throat, half of it dripping down her chin to the water below.

"Disgusting," Madara spits with cold disdain. Kisame isn't sure if it's a comment on the cannibalistic endeavor, or the sentiment she displays. He doesn't care.

"ZABUZA," she wails, lunging desperately, her fingers inside Zetsu's face, jerking the bicolored bastards head around. She reaches for their teammate, her free hand passing just shy of his sandaled foot, inches away from the blade his brother still grasps in his hand.

"The eye," Madara orders, and Kisame hurtles himself forward. He knows that the eye is power, knows that Madara cannot have it, that it will destroy them all. The Rinnegan is from the Sage himself, from the gods, and no mortal should have it, let alone a revived corpse.

Ryuishi doesn't even hesitate. She rips the eye free of Zetsu, who crumples against Madara's legs with a string of insults. In that moment, he is unsure if she plans to hand it over, or destroy it for good.

Kisame doesn't figure it out, doesn't care as he eats up the last of the distance, swinging his sword at Madara. He feels rage and grief like he has never known.

The Uchiha, of course, manages to dodge most of the blow, and Zabuza drops to the water, falling off the bladed end of the her meteor hammer with a wet splat. A chain covered fist comes around to block Kisame's sword, and he howls at Madara, a fever coursing through his veins.

The Uchiha looks nothing but annoyed as he matches the blow, but his arms tremble at the strength of Kisame's strike, and he is leery of the living sword that snaps at him, and even more so of the swordsman who seems to be shifting before his eyes, growing fins and hunching into a more monstrous shape. He assumed Orochimaru was the only one capable of transforming his body, but it seems that for once, he was wrong.

Behind them, Ryuishi swims, eye in hand, and she reaches out her arms to grasp Zabuza, who sinks more than he floats. He can't seem to draw up the energy to funnel his chakra to his feet and stand on it's surface. In fact, he can seem to draw the energy to do much of anything.

He feels tepid fingers grasp his arm, feels the familiar embrace of Ryuishi as she drags him through the liquid toward her, pressing her hands against the hole in him, as if it will keep the blood inside. He can feel the absolute agony of water on his exposed insides, and the intense, screaming pain of his chest being torn through.

"Z'Buza," she whimpers, and he can feel her lips ghost across the shell of his ear as she maneuvers him from behind, trying to align his body onto hers to keep his head above water.

"Stay," she begs, and for a moment, he wonders what she's talking about, but then he feels her. He feels her tainted chakra in a way he never has before. It's soft and comforting, not unnatural any longer. The tendrils creep inside him, and they put distance between the pain and his mind. It doesn't matter that he's struggling for breath, or that a thousand neurons are firing signals to alert him to duress. The emptiness consumes those things, makes them less visceral, makes the blood pouring out of him seem less worrying.

"Ryu-" he manages, because he actually wants to say something. Wants to say it doesn't seem so bad, this emptiness, not when he expected to be tormented for all eternity, a demon among demons. He almost likes the idea of it, giving in to this part of her, lingering like a ghost with her until it unmakes him.

But the words are taken by the Void, and all he can do is grunt as Zetsu approaches them, the black side of him torn to shreds, and the white side dominant for once as he crawls his way over.

"Whore," the white side says, voice singsong and calm.

She snarls, a sound that has never failed excite Zabuza, and even now he takes comfort in it. If she is snarling, she is alive. She is there when nobody else can be, and she will fight. It is what they do best-the fighting.

Zetsu freezes, not because she intimidates him, but because her hand has closed into a fist around the Rinnegan. White doesn't even want to think of the damage already done to it, the infection that could be spreading in the liquid, the cell death occurring right now. He's not strong enough to steal the other, not for a while yet, and Black needs it. They both do, to sway Madara back into their control.

White takes in the scene, his alien mind working hard. He sees the way she desperately clutches at the man in her arms, the way he seems to be fading fast. His brow furrows, and he regenerate his arm for a second time, catching her gaze.

"I can fix him," White says, and he sees her confusion melt. He reads the feeble realization dawning in her, because she's a terrible witch, and she *knows*. She knows he can do it, knows that he has brought people back from death itself, given crushed bodies new life and new form.

Black laughs, even though he has no eye to see, and it is a wretched sound. White can feel the dark amusement inside his partner, the bitterness and satisfaction he gets from making her choose. The eye is the world. It will give Madara the boost he needs to overcome everything, to pick right back up where the Akatsuki left off, catching Bijuu and bringing back Kaguya. He isn't the best he can be right now, merely at the peak he had in his youth, but she knows that if she gives Zetsu the Rinnegan, Madara will transcend the borders of human limitations. That he will rise high above if given the Paths and Zetsu's Mokuton.

She shivers, and he can see her grief, her mourning as she stares at the shredded remains of her partner's chest. There is a gaping hole in the shape of her very own weapon peeking through where his heart and lungs should be, and for a moment, Zetsu thinks she's given up. That she will deny him, crush the eye and ruin everything once more.

But Watanabe, for all she is a witch and soothsayer, does not have the strength. Whatever it she is seems close enough to human that she has all the failings and trappings of one. It's a shame, because in another world, Kaguya would have delighted in this beast, a creature set out to shape the world to her will, to end wars and suffering with her own conviction. White has no doubt Watanabe would have eaten the forbidden fruit as well.

"Heal him," she whispers damningly, her fist stretching out. Black fumbles for it, closing his hand around her own, but she doesn't hand the eye over yet. Her fingers are still wrapped threateningly around it, as if she will crush it if White backs down or tries to fool her.

He doesn't need to. He reaches out, focused on re-creating what he knows needs to be, grafting his flesh into the swordsman, and knows that she will have to live with this choice. Every day she will wake, and she will have to know that she traded the entire world for just one man. Every village that is destroyed by Madara, and every jinchuuriki that dies from the extraction will be on her hands. Zetsu takes delight in the fact that not even an ocean could wipe all that blood away. She will have turned the seas red and watered the earth with it before this is over.

The swordsman screams as the white begins to fill the hole inside of him, and White makes it as painful as possible. He keeps his ministrations just shy of sending his patient into cardiac arrest, because he wants this vile little toy of hers to live, to have to face the monster that traded his life for the life of her sons, that she gave away the future of the world for a lackluster shinobi. He wants Zabuza to remember.

And then the swordsman stills in her arms, his fist still wrapped tight around his blade, his breathing shallow and hard. He's still lost too much blood, and he's deep in the throes of shock, his pulse weak and erratic, but Zetsu has no doubt the stubborn fool will live to regret.

Still her hand is closed around the orb, and Black snarls at the implied threat. She looks up from the Zabuza, and she meets White's bronze eye, her expression set.

"Take it. Take your pawn and go," she orders, her voice hoarse, and Black laughs as her fingers release. She said once she would have set the whole world on fire for the people she loves, and in this, she is not a liar.

White can feel the approaching signatures, as tall and broad as mountains. The Kazekage and Mizukage are on their way, and Madara has only just awakened. There has been no time for planning or upgrades, and Zetsu honestly isn't sure how the man will

fare against four opponents of such a level without the eye and the Mokuton.

Zetsu sneers at her, and she holds his gaze, tugging the swordsman close. White knows he will relish the memory of this, her defeat and lingering despair, her face cast in the light of the new dawn. Together he and Black will run the image of her bleeding eyes and desperate hands clutching at her partner over and over again, and it will keep them satisfied until Kaguya returns.

"We'll meet again, little kunoichi," they promise her in unison, but she is as unmoved as stone as she stares forward, watching them stand and take off towards Madara, who kicks his opponent away from him, sucking more chakra from her as his side heals over.

Obito curses her in the confines of her own mind, but she can't feel much. She can barely focus. The Void inside of Madara is beginning to slip away, bringing her something almost like relief. The further he gets, the more whole he becomes, and the less he has to steal from her meager chakra reserves. Hopefully, when he's far enough away, the leaching will stop completely, and he'll have to rely on his newly constituted body to supply him instead of her own.

She swims exhaustedly, tenderly holding on to Zabuzza as she kicks her feet toward the crumpled heap of Kisame, who looks like he just went a round with... well, Uchiha Madara. He's too skinny by far, his chakra drained from him, his tiny cloak shredded, and his mask shattered but still hanging on.

"Kisame-" she tries, but her voice is weak from the talking and shouting. It feels like it takes everything to struggle through the death inside her just to say that.

His head tilts, and she notices his nose is broken, smashed sideways on his face, and he's missing a few teeth. His breaths are heavy and ragged as she draws near, and Samehada is strangely quiet as she approaches.

"Zabuza," he rumbles, and it sounds wheezy, as if he's broken more than a few ribs. "The eye."

She finally reaches him, her hand moving to grab his wrist and drag his fingers over to Zabuza's neck. He watches her as the dawn takes hold of the sky, and the sunlight illuminates his unit, casting them both in gold.

He'll only ever speak of the relief he feels when Zabuza's pulse, weak and shy, flutters against his fingers in hushed whispers in the future, but at the moment, he nearly laughs from the joy of it. That is until he realizes she hasn't spoken of the Rinnegan, and Zabuza has a stretch of white inside his chest, right where his heart was run through.

"You," he breathes and stops there, unable to continue, and she looks old then, weathered by time and years her body does not have. She is an elder, like Jiraiya and Orochimaru, trapped inside a young body, and she only nods to confirm what he knows. For her own selfish desires, she sold the eye, gave it back when she could have destroyed it.

"I died," she rasps quietly. "I died once, and I couldn't let him die too."

Kisame doesn't know what to think. He's relieved to know that Zabuza is alive, that he has a chance, but the implications are massive. Too big to consider.

So he doesn't. He grits his teeth and leans over his unit, letting himself fall through the surface of the water, and he holds them close. It's painful, and Zabuza isn't even coherent, but they are alive. They are here, together, and they can figure things out later.

The sun rises in the east, and they stink of ash and summoned water, battle sweat and fatigue. Everybody is in pain to some degree, and Kisame can feel the approach of others, but he holds on,

burying his face in between theirs. Somehow, Zabuza's skin still stinks like weapons oil, and Ryuishi still smells of the sea.

She shudders against them, clinging tighter, and Samehada gurgles out a warning. She knows it cannot last, and somewhere, Obito is already trying to build a wall between them again, but they are too mixed up, their thoughts and memories tangled together. She can't think straight, her mind still hazy, and her eyes and head are aching like none other. Words cannot express the depth of her emotions, the way she feels wrung out, caught between two wrongs, or the way she knows she will have to pay for her actions again and again until her life is taken. In a sense, she has never understood the Third Hokage more than in this moment, never related to Tsunade's want to run away as much as she does right now.

Nothing is right. Nothing ever was right.

Kisame's shrunk arms knot them together, and though she remembers what he has done, she feels safety, feels a warmth she desperately needs.

It's not meant for the moment though, not meant for just yet. Zabuza needs medical attention, and Kisame needs to disappear. He's weak, they all are, but he has a way to escape, to hide in plain sight.

"Go," she whispers, knowing it must be done, but still hating the feeling of his head lifting. "Go, into Samehada."

He wheezes against her neck, reaching for the sword that hates her blindly, and the blade doesn't struggle as much as she thought it would as it comes closer. Maybe it's because she's so weak, so drained of chakra.

Kisame doesn't ask her how she knows, doesn't ask why, he just rests his chin on her head as the sword wraps around him, swallowing him in the fusion. The morning sunlight pours over them, and he turns his face down, his lips against her crown for good luck and strength.

The last thing he sees before he's fully fused is her hand wrapping around Samehada's hilt, her palm being speared by tiny spikes, and her doggedly stoic face lit by the golden rays as she kicks off toward the gathering forces, carrying her team with her.

AN: AAAAAAnnnnd this is pretty much the end folks. There's a epilogue that brings a better sense of finality, but OTRATS has come pretty much to a neat little close. Seriously. I know it sucks a million dicks, but I did an open ending.

I cannot thank you enough for taking this journey with me. Seriously, to the ones who have read and reviewed every chapter, to the people who peeked in and quietly remained, thank you. To those awesome reviewers who commented on every chapter, and to that one reviewer who only ever commented the word 'nice', thank you.

And to my Beta, Enbi, who I kinda suckered into this; thank you. Without you, this fic would have died at chapter twenty, max. You helped inspire me, helped me find the plot when I lost it - Hell, you helped me make the fucking plot. I would be remiss without you, and it has been my pleasure to be your friend. Just imagine, one more week, and you will be free from my editing nightmare.

Until the Epilogue my guys.

Epilogue: Choice

I do not own Naruto. Nonlinear epilogue. Thank you for reading.

"What do you mean there's been an attack on Otogakure?"

The Hokage's office isn't like what it used to be when Sarutobi was in charge. For one thing, the papers are meticulously organized, though it is done by worn ANBU members and a weary Shizune instead of Tsunade herself. They come in stacks, bundles tied together with sealed tape, all sorted into separate cubby boxes. There's one for finance, for legislature, missions, and surprisingly enough, foreign affairs.

Another thing is that Tsunade, unlike her predecessor, doesn't care much for smoking, and had the walls scrubbed, along with new furniture moved in. Even the hanging scrolls had to be changed to get rid of the lingering scent of seasoned pipe tobacco. The yellow-stained windows were replaced with new glass from Wind-thicker, more resistant to shatter, and less likely to let out sound.

The last part he only figured out after he returned from the beach in Wind, and Tsunade spent three solid hours terrifying his genin team, laying out every charge they could have face and outlining the punishments in excruciating detail. Safe to say, Team Seven was grounded, village-bound for the foreseeable future. Not only were they assigned a massive amount of D-ranks (which the team viewed as a sort of soft vacation from insanity at best, and training for their creativity at worst) but they were also assigned gruelling hours of training, both by himself and Tenzō, and Lady Hokage as well.

Kakashi takes a sort of petty pleasure in knowing that as soon as his cute brats have been run into the ground by him, and then pummeled into paste by Tenzō, that the Hokage herself has been crushing them into a perfect, shinobi-sized shape. He saw Sakura

burst into tears the other day after having to go over the trading contracts of the western section of the village, and Sasuke looked close himself, stuck with the unsightly details of civilian and shinobi relations.

Naruto, of course, was hopelessly lost, and his bruised clones occasionally, and spontaneously, combusted for no good reason at all. That boy was muttering legalese in his sleep, and even his healing factor couldn't help him with all the headaches he received from having to memorize every single tenketsu point in the human body.

Still, the office is spacey now, with less clutter than before. Yes, there are still papers lying about, and various stamps, brushes, seals, and weapons can be found on a variety of surfaces, but it seems that the woman in charge has a driving need not to let the environment around her fall into disorder, one that extends not just into her interior decorating, but her policies as well. She's learned her lesson from Danzō, and from Ryuishi. She needs to know what is where at all times, or someone is going to take advantage of her ignorance.

"I'm not sure how much clearer I can make it, Hatake," Tsunade says, leaning back in her chair, her hands steeped before her. "Otogakure was victim to an attack, and though Jiraiya reports the actual damage to the city was almost negligible, he says the danger to us is imminent."

Kakashi wants to groan in frustration, or maybe rip out his hair. It's been less than three weeks since they left the beach house, and Team Seven is as safe as can be, but Ryuishi, *Ryuishi* -

That woman is a walking magnet for trouble and destruction. He knew he should have stayed and sent Tenzō back alone. There was hardly any trouble as it was, and his kōhai definitely could have taken those bandits without him. The team would have been fine, and he could have grilled Ryuishi about her strange knowledge, and Obito (and possibly the conflicting signals she was sending him).

"I can be ready in an hour," he says, his mind already cataloguing the gear he'll need. Overnight will be minimal, so that's good, however, he might need to break out his old armour. He doesn't relish the idea of being around so many big blades and sharp teeth without it. Also, soldier pills from the Akimichi, because he knows there's that chakra-eating sword involved in this somehow. He wouldn't put it past the Kisame to attack again, probably throwing some sort of fit. Obviously, she needs to punch him in the genitals more, probably until the swordsman goes impotent or gets the message and just *leaves* -

Tsunade quirks her brow, smirking.

"That won't be necessary. The toad summons say that the attackers have already fled, and the village is secure. However, Jiraiya has sent an alert out to me, tipped off by Orochimaru," she says to him, her face growing serious. "As Sasuke's and Naruto's jounin-sensei, and a man bearing one of the last Sharingan, it pertains to you."

Kakashi puts his frustration and fear in the back of his mind, paying close attention. Anything involving both Sharingan and jinchuuriki has disaster written all over it, and most likely, Ryuishi's name somewhere off to the side.

Tsunade sighs, looking tired. "It seems that Orochimaru has perfected the Second's infamous technique, Edo Tensei."

A shiver runs down his spine, because even though every village has its forbidden jutsu, this one is especially concerning. Not only because it reverses the way of things and subverts the natural order, but because of the possibilities and allure it presents. He doesn't know the details, but he knows that even he is enticed by the idea of seeing his departed loved ones again. To speak one last time with Rin, or to clear the air with his father... It's wrong, he knows that, but the temptation still exists despite that knowledge.

It seems, however, that the lucrative promise of cheap and effective military might is what he should be worried about.

"Uchiha Madara has been revived," Tsunade says abruptly, shocking Kakashi to the bone. "Not only that, but the summoner is a known enemy of the Konoha, and the instigator of the attack. An entity known as Zetsu, who apparently can create fully-functioning clones of himself, capable of mass combat. This alone would be terrifying, but apparently, the famed dōjutsu held by the Sage of Six Paths has surfaced from the history books, and is in the fugitive's possession. Your little girly wasn't lying about that one."

Kakashi cannot speak, as stunned as he is. He can only feel dread coil in his gut, a cold sweat breaking out on his brow. Uchiha Madara was bad enough, especially if he is even one tenth of what the legends say, but Madara with the Rinnegan, and a seemingly subservient clone that can mass produce itself in great number, each one capable of fighting, and perhaps summoning the dead?

There are no words that can describe how dire the situation has become.

"And since she wasn't lying about that one, we can only assume that she was telling at least partial truth with her other information as well. Zetsu has the Sharingan, and he has a Rinnegan, and he's mostly going after the Jinchuuriki in order to revive the Juubi and whatever the hell Kaguya is," she says calmly. "All he needs is the power to get them."

He swallows, feeling like his anxiety has physically manifested and wedged in his windpipe. This is... huge. This is bigger than a single Bijuu or war. This kind of power could wipe everything from the map.

Training his team isn't going to be enough. Naruto can master the Rasengan a thousand times over, mSasuke can learn to summon a the greatest of hawks, and Sakura can dissect with all the grace of Tsunade and coldness of Orochimaru, but it's not enough to go against the Juubi.

It can't go that far. It simply can't.

"The other nations, they have to be warned..." he says, and it's a huge concession, but it needs to be done.

"Already done, but things are in uproar right now. Kumo, of course, is as taciturn as ever, but The Raikage didn't kill the messenger, which can only be good news. However, the Tsuchikage did kill his, and we can only thank the stars that he attacked the hawk carrying the slug first, and the real summon escaped. I'd have to kill him myself if he layed a finger on even the smallest piece of Katsuyu," Tsunade explains, ticking the leaders off her fingers as they go. "Presumably, the Mizukage and Kazekage have been warned as they are already in Oto-though what they have decided to do is yet to be seen-and that just leaves the jinchuuriki in Takigakure." Kakashi watches her lips thin out as she hovers over that last, raised finger, staring at it as if it frustrates her to no end.

"Unfortunately, the leader of Taki is a twenty-year-old brat named Shibuki, who became head after his father died from drinking the Hero Water. He sent a message back thanking us for the information, but the way he worded it was strange. There's something that stinks in Taki, Hatake, and I can't figure it out."

She flicks her finger down, looking disgusted, and the sigh she heaves out seems to carry the weight of nations. In this case, it might actually be so. Her hand raises to cover her eyes, and she leans forward again, bracing her weight against the desk, her elbows propping her up.

"And if that wasn't enough, Grass and Rain will officially be declared warzones within two years. As soon as the daimyo get their heads out of their collective asses and get over the fact that your nutjob girlfriend-"

"She's not my girlfriend," Kakashi insists.

"-Your nutjob *not* -girlfriend's people somehow killed one of them, they will probably try and send us out to find her too, regardless of the fact that Otogakure is technically the center of trade for the

continent right now, and an attack on them is an attack on everyone. I bet they're already looking for loopholes in the treaties, trying to find a way to get rid of her without hurting their pocketbooks," Tsunade says scathingly, looking frustrated, her honey eyes glaring at him for interrupting her.

Kakashi, understandably, is concerned. He's already fought one war, and the idea of another is terrifying, especially with everything else at stake. He's lost too much as it is, and he will not see his team go through the same. Wouldn't wish it on any village at all.

He feels helpless, thrown into this mess. He's just one man, and though he is a skilled shinobi, he cannot juggle everything.

And then he realizes that's the problem. Nobody can manage that much. Not Tsunade, not him, not the even the Sage himself. Upkeeping this all is not a task any one person can do, no matter what the nobles think.

"The daimyo..." he says, feeling treacherous even voicing that doubt, but Tsunade watches him carefully, and she nods, just once. There is silence as the realization that a conflict is arising on every single front, because the daimyo are upset about themselves and their troubles, and they will not hesitate to try and take advantage of the shinobi under their control to fight their wars for them.

But Tsunade, the Hokage, hesitates, because she is a leader in her own right. She worked to get where she is, fought on the frontlines and lost both her brother and lover to war. Kakashi doubts that she will put her village through another war for the sake of a foreign noble's death or her own daimyo's fear.

Before, he might have never questioned like he does now. Before, he may have followed his orders, obeyed the chain of command, but he realizes that he doesn't have faith like that any longer. He has seen what daimyo are, what the people they rule over are like, and he is torn because they are the heavenly rulers. They are birthed

and taught, given instruction on how to best lead, and they should know what is correct. He is but a shinobi, and they are the kings.

But... but the shinobi villages arose because ninja weren't samurai. Ninja were not content to war at each other for the sake of their lords, for concepts like honor and divinity, squabbling over territory and stock for whoever paid the most. No, Senju Hashirama brought ninja together because he believed in peace, believed that he could do what was right for the people, regardless of what the Daimyo thought.

"I don't understand," he admits, because it's tangled, all the pieces coming together at strange angles. The conundrum he started after the mission in the Land of Rivers is convoluted and strange, far more complicated than he can conceive at this moment in time.

Tsunade snorts, raising her head and casting her eyes over at him. She's in a wry mood, despite her tiredness.

"Join the club," she says. "I started making charts and graphs to keep it all together, and honestly, I'm tempted to just let Watanabe and Orochimaru have their fun. If they weren't just attacked, I might have believed them to be some sort of vain, overly-callous and snarky brand of superhuman. As horrible as it is, hearing the news actually reassures me a bit, because it reminds me that they can fail as well."

He hesitates, wondering if his next question falls under the umbrella of professional discussion. Technically, he's still her handler, and ambassador, so it *should* be his business.

"Is she...?"

Tsunade rolls her eyes, shuffling a piece of paper in front of her to read. "She's not dead or gravely injured. Jiraiya says she arrived to the fight already damaged, bleeding from the eyes, and that Edo Tensei did something to her that he can't name. Almost like a leech or battery effect, but Orochimaru has officially declared her as

severely chakra exhausted, having been dealt moderate injuries in the attack."

"Unofficially?" he prompts, reading between the lines.

"Unofficially, Orochimaru sent over some files for a long-distance consultation, and I do have to say that I have no idea how someone manages to literally hemorrhage their eyes till they bleed and not go blind or burst the eye. You reported something like this before, but the state of deterioration I saw was of a fully-fledged jounin Uchiha, not a woman from Kiri pushing mid-twenties. It gives even more credence to your weird report, specifically the living Uchiha members," Tsunade says with a scowl, flicking through the files in one of the bins. "To be honest, I was actually hoping it was all a drug-induced hallucination on everyone's part."

Kakashi closes his eyes in sympathy, because he understands. How could he not? The first time he ever met Ryuishi she shucked her shirt off and punched him in the face, and it only got progressively odder from there. It's been espionage and recruitment alongside strangely domestic sleepovers for years. He might understand even less now than when this all began.

"What do we do?" he asks after a moment.

Tsunade pauses, staring down at the pages, looking past the paper and the words. He feels like she's been asking herself this question for a while now. Her glossed lips purse, and he has to remind himself that the blonde in front of him is pushing sixty, nowhere near the barely thirty she looks.

"We do what we can," she answers finally. "Get Jiraiya back in the village, have him break out his fuinjutsu set for the first time in years, pass on what he can to his godson. We heighten border security, attempt to start producing our own food sources and textiles. Comb through our forces, and see what Tenzo can do with the remains of Root. Most of all, we keep our friends close, and our enemies closer."

It's a vague outline, but better than nothing. He doesn't miss the fact that a large part of her attention is going towards self-sufficiency and military strength.

Which means that the next generation is going to have to train harder than before, and his own is going to do everything in its power to keep them off the battlefield for as long as they can.

He only has two more questions: How will his team react to the news? And why does Ryuishi, with all the clues and puzzle pieces that just won't fit, seem to have been planning for something like this since the beginning?

Itachi doesn't plan on sticking around long, especially not when security is tightening in like a noose and every person is being screened. He never knew a sweep of this magnitude could be issued, let alone effectively carried out.

He has twelve hours, max, to get out of the village and get started. He planted a seed this morning, a tiny one, but he's sure that the word of the androgynous figure dressed in Watanabe's standard clothes running across rooftops and assisting with the evacuation is sure to spread. At first, he might be just a clone, but as long as he keeps it up like this, he'll find his way toward infamy.

But rather than a random figure, he's going to need to be the Rakki Ryuu, and for that, he needs one last thing. The bun he can do, the elaborate tattoo he can fake, but the pin is unique. The pin is a known entity, a staple of the position, and he needs it.

Unfortunately, he doesn't have time to wait for Watanabe to retrieve it from her ward. He's just going to have to do it his own way, and steal it from the boy's things.

It's hard, with the legions of patrols and random, wary citizens. Everyone is tense and on high alert, waiting for news, eager to know what happened to their homes and property. The collective mood of

the people is unsettled, and they wait in the safehouses and bunkers, only emerging as shinobi and kunoichi come to tell them it's safe. Only a few groups at a time, of course, to avoid stampedes and riots, or even worse, looting.

The foreign diplomats' quarters aren't as guarded, which is logical, seeing how most everyone who was boarded inside of them is either powerful enough to hold their own, with someone of that power level, or currently being treated in the medical facilities. Still, Itachi has to dodge a squad of roaming Kaguya clan members, who guard the premise watchfully, almost as if they are daring intruders to tempt them into violence.

It can't be easy, to build a new home after being run from their last, and to have no target when it is attacked.

Still, the once-nomadic clan members native to Rice seem to calm their Water brethren, and Itachi slips past them in the undergrowth, casting a split-second genjutsu as a distraction and sliding underneath the ground. Doton techniques aren't his forte, and he has to go deep to avoid the sensor, but he manages. He always does.

He emerges outside their visual range, chakra concealed and presence smothered, and he makes it past three more such rings before he's near the visiting quarters, usually reserved for cousins of nobility, or Kage and their immediate family. He knows the Suna siblings he met are stationed in this building, and one Yuki Haku.

Nobody told him this. He can feel it, see their chakra lingering on the walls from where they were first startled by the explosion and the alarms. He can almost hear the sand grains underneath his foot, and the air stinks of medical herbs that can be turned to poison.

He lingers there in that hallway for just a moment, closing his eyes and touching the wall. Nothing like this was supposed to happen. The Akatsuki at least had a plan to wait for two years before they

began picking off jinchuuriki. This was so that once Ame opened it's borders, it wouldn't be immediately implicated in the thefts.

Now there is no wait. No watching or slowly preparing. The world is being thrown headfirst into a new age, and as he struggles to meet the demands of the situation, in some ways, he sees others regressing.

The Kaijuu are made anew. Not what they were, but something else. He saw Samehada in her hands, saw her cling to it despite the damage it caused. He saw Watanabe's fingers go white around Momochi's, witnessed her snarl and spit at Orochimaru and Jiraiya, and dare the Kazekage and Mizukage to defy her with her gaze alone.

No-like the Sannin are reborn, so are the Monsters of the Mist. Old teams are coming together again to forge new paths, and in the shadows, leaves turn over new sides to adapt.

He opens his eyes again, slinking into the room. Itachi is a master at what he does, the pinnacle of everything a shinobi should be. It is nothing to steal a single hairpin.

But Yuki Haku is no green genin, and can hardly be called chunin anymore. He's unaffiliated, not tied by nations or creeds, and he has been waiting. He knows his mother, knows that she will come to carry him to safety, to guard him from harm. Knows his father will attempt to stoically shield him from violence, turn his eyes from things he must see in the same way his water clone tried in the early morning.

He's not a child, but not an adult. He isn't ready to join them side-by-side in their separate arenas, not yet, but he's too old to keep being coddled. At fourteen, his mother was building kingdoms, and his father was a hunter-nin and part of the Seven Swordsmen. This morning, he watched a boy two years his junior lift wagons into warehouses and put out fires with titanic walls of sand. He watched a girl his own age talk circles around the guards, going on about

legalities, customs, and combining forces until her bladed tongue got her what she needed while Zabuza clone kept him back.

He's been raised enough, more educated than any noble's child, and more groomed than either of them. He can't stay where his caretakers will guard him forever.

Uchiha Itachi is an unexpected guest as Haku floats in the mirror, solemnly contemplating. He watches him enter warily, and search the room with his eyes before pinning the ice-covered glass with a hard stare.

At first, Haku thinks the obvious. That the Uchiha dressed in his mother's clothes is there to bring him to her, because if anything, the man has been constantly courteous to her, but then he follows those eyes to the bone white pin in Haku's hands, and the Yuki knows that the answer is far from what it first seems.

They stand in silence, watching each other, and Haku's thoughts race. The pin is a crown, meant for only one thing, and the fact that Itachi-san is mimicking his mother's looks can only mean that he wishes to dethrone her in some way.

He readies himself, knowing he will be fighting a losing battle, but ready to try anyway. He will not win, but he can last long enough to-

"An heir," the Uchiha says quietly to the mirror, and the reflection staring out. "To a legend she wants to live on."

Haku's fingers close around the adornment, and he grinds his teeth. *He* is the heir, has sat in on the lessons, learned the trade and how it all interweaves. This other man is nothing but a usurper. He may trump Haku with force, but the legend's hands are supposed to be loving, not distant and callous. They have to *care* .

"Not you," Haku calls back, his voice warped by the glass and cold. "*Me* ."

"Perhaps at one time," Itachi allows softly, his eyes trying to communicate something, a change in plans that makes his heart ache.

Haku smiles, but it is not a kind thing. It is like the mirror, all sharp edges and hoarfrost, cutting and cold, and it sits as pretty as belladonna on his shapely face. The Uchiha thinks he's being gentle, being kind, but this one doesn't know kindness. He knows battle and struggle, but not peace, not acceptance and understanding.

"Me," Haku repeats, more forceful this time. "You may dress like the Rakki Ryuu, may emulate it, but you don't *know* it. You didn't grow up in hard places in hard times. You have not struggled to eat, been degraded for your birth. You know nothing of the garden she planted, and you will sterilize it with your systematic, callous implementation."

The other man stares, not answering, and Haku figures there is a way to get what he needs, a teacher who will be impassive and impartial. Uchiha Itachi is well known for being fearsome and skilled, a prodigy with his bloodline and an embodiment of the renegade shinobi. He knows how to fight, how to hide, and how to survive, but does he know what products to move where, or how to relate to a worker who has been looked down on their whole life? Can he blend in with a ramshackle town, adopt the local fashion and slang?

Does he know of the inner workings? The subtleties Haku has been surrounded with?

"The game is played forward, not back," Haku recites, quoting something Ryuishi once said. "All you know is killing and dying, Uchiha-san, but I can teach you more if you will teach me."

Itachi doesn't move for a second, but then he tilts his head a few centimeters to the side, and he nods just once, as if he is listening.

Haku smiles, and in his heart, he knows that his family will forgive him if he goes. He will always have a home to return to, and he can consult his parents with messengers along the way. It's not like he's

leaving forever, or even going without some sort of contact to his loved ones. He just needs to create himself, to learn and grow.

He wants... no, he *needs* to be the inheritor of his mother's kingdom. He needs to carry on a legacy that means so much to so many, that means so much to him personally. He knows it won't be easy, that there will be troubles and problems.

Still, he thinks he should probably avoid an in-person meeting for some time. He'll be running drills for days without rest if they ever get their hands on him. Yes, it's better to let them cool down first. Only a year, of course.

Haku packs his bags, thinks some more, and winces. Maybe two.

"Your children are gone."

She does not flinch or look away from him, her gaze level and cool. She does not bow her head in shame, or wince at the verbal blow, nor does she tremble at the physical pain she is in, her hands and chakra reserves still mending. She has changed, this little project of his. Colder now, more directed and contained.

"I am aware," she says simply.

"Young Haku is under the eye of a man who holds him as you hold his brother. The Kazekage has taken his son under his personal tutelage. Jiraiya returns to pass on his knowledge to the Kyuubi jinchuuriki, and the Mizukage is not ignorant to the sword you carried that morning, nor am I," Orochimaru says, coldly stating facts.

"I am aware," she says again, unruffled in her appearance, eyes meeting his. Her sclera are beginning to clear from their hemorrhaging, but even he does not know if they will be the same as they were. He refuses to heal her, and is reluctant to have her stand before him. The link in her mind is a dangerous thing, and her wounds should be constant reminders of her choices.

"There is the seedling of war, and though it is contained for now, it will spread with the help of Madara and Zetsu. Lightning is gathering its forces, and Earth is waiting for an opportune moment. Fire, Wind, and Water country are allied with us in name, but hold no trust in their hearts. Sound does not have enough forces to defend itself should they attack. It may take half a year, it may take three, but it will come," he continues, striking harder.

She does not waver.

"What is it you plan to do?" Orochimaru asks her, growing bored.

"I don't know."

He blinks, registering the words and frowning just the slightest. He taps his finger just once on his armrest and views her through half-lidded eyes. Her features are cast in stark contrast by the sconces on the wall, and should display any tells that she has, but there is nothing. Not a change in her eyes, or a tug at her lips. Her posture is the same, ever so defensive and predatory, seemingly lackadaisical and yet anything but.

"You lie, child," he says coolly, feeling the words seep like venom from between his teeth, because she must be lying. She has to be.

She has plans, always has plans. She had plans for her little swordsman, the proof is in the white flesh that holds his chest together. She has plans for the man who called himself her leader, and yet came running like a dog when she was in danger. Scheming is what they do. It's how they account for every stray strand of fate that crosses their path, and weave it to their own ends.

(And it's irksome that she refuses to let go of some of those stays. She made him choose that morning-cut down a nuisance, or hunt the ones who attacked his city. It was a flawless deflection on her part, and now he has not seen the sword or its wielder in weeks. Just as long as her hands have remained wounded in penance.)

"I might be lying through ignorance," she agrees. "But I do not know what I will do next."

He doesn't answer, but his mood drops. She is truly admitting her ignorance and inability, not playing any part. She's distancing herself from everything, including him.

"I don't know what's best for the world. I have trouble figuring out what's best for me, Orochimaru. It was foolishness to think that I could impose morality and culture onto a world that already had its own. All I've done is made an ambiguous situation even more muddled."

Orochimaru allows a small hum to sound through the chambers. It echoes off the stone walls melodiously. In the end, they both know what he thinks. The lines between them have always been clear, just as visible as the scar around her throat. Emotional dissonance does not matter, in the end.

"You will remain as long as you are more useful than detrimental," he says, the words calm and ever so soft. It is a dare, a goad to see if she really means what she says. Before, she would visibly strain under the explicit order, but now she does not move.

"I will not leave you," she agrees calmly. He wants to detest it, the arrogance behind it all, but this is her confession. This is her statement of loyalty. She may have reclaimed some things, but she is not unaware of the one who has always been there. She will not run away and abandon her work, or her partner.

He doesn't give anything away, but silently, he approves. Gold meets coal and the two stand in silence, an understanding passing between them. They know that in truth, he has barely touched upon the troubles she has.

Ryuishi does not say it, but she is thankful. She does not need to hear them to know.

Zabuza has white flesh inside his chest. Getting rid of it requires healing that can only be done by one woman, and their son is out gallivanting with Uchiha Itachi. Kakashi is angry at her, deserves to be angry at her, and he's far away where she can't fix what's between them, with a team that has already been influenced by her too much. Kisame is an asshole, repentant but problematic, and she has to punch him in the dick a thousand more times when he gets out of his sword. Misaki and Kagami are locked in verbal combat somewhere in Kumo, and the sects of what is left need a guiding hand.

That's not even half of them. Probably not even a third. She could go on, about the projected outcomes that are all ordered in descending order of fucked up. She could start a segment on how she has no clue about her own interpersonal relationships anymore, or how she's pretty sure the Void inside her has gained ground after years of being held back. She could wax poetic about how Obito and her have become less 'he' and 'she', more of 'they'. About how the ember of self that sustained her after death, as hard and solid as diamond, melted away and became something else.

Years ago, she was born into this world. Back then she was sure, so very sure, that she could shape it into something *better*. That she could change things that needed to be changed, inject her new ideas into the system, morph it like that. Hell, not even a full month ago she was convinced she just needed to control it better, to reign like a dictator.

She's not done. Not with the paperwork from the evacuation, not done cleaning up the mess that is trade, not done trying even though a part of her wants to be. She's tired, physically, mentally, and emotionally. A piece of her wants to lie down and quietly give the rest of herself to the Void, dragging Obito's parts with her. It thinks that they are ready for eternal non-existence, that they made a mess they can't clean up, and the next step is to leave it to somebody with a better chance of repairing it instead of fucking it up further.

But then, she did okay in some areas. People are alive because her, new children and seniors grown, adults who learned to read at twenty eight, and learned to write at twenty nine. There is art, literature, science and math spinning in every direction; advancements that both benefit and harm. Zabuza and Haku live, The Akatsuki has been set back years, and Gaara and Naruto have friends and family; social circles to depend on outside of her.

Her mind is so ready, finds it so easy to paint it in black and white, but it's never been so. It's always been colors, so many colors and shades...

Orochimaru stares at her, and she doesn't know why, but she smiles. It's the barest twist of her lips stretching across her face, a mimicry of something that goes unnamed. Perhaps it is sadness, or a tiredness that goes bone deep. Maybe it is the rage or fear that lives inside her heart that makes it's way to her face. It could even be gratefulness, relief, or most unbelievably of all, joy, that pulls the corner of her lips upward.

Orochimaru smiles back, and his expression is just as vague as hers.

Zabuza is quiet as he stares down at the carefully inked lines of the drawings she made decades ago, taking in each face as if it is the first time he is seeing them, and the portraits haven't hung in their house since the start. The paper is brittle against his fingertips, yellowed by the years and worn by the abuse it saw before it was put somewhere safe.

"Dead," he says finally, breaking the silence. It's just one word, but it hangs heavy, a tangible weight among the three of them.

"Died," she corrects tiredly from beside him, leaning back against the pillows.

He is tempted to ask what the difference is, but his chest twinges as if to remind him of the spiralling Void inside of her, the one that took away his pain and sang out to bring him home. That nothingness is death, and it exists inside her, but it isn't who she is.

"And that's how you...?" Kisame trails off, subdued. His frame is still a bit small from the chakra drain, lightly muscled and a bit bony. It makes it easier for him to fit on the cushion with them all, at least.

"Yes," she says finally. It's only taken her twenty four years to come clean. Or, sorta clean.

She supposes at this point it helps that it has been empirically proven that she's linked to death. Nobody else in the world could act as a funnel for Edo Tensei.

It also probably helps that her unit, for better or worse, is stuck together now. It's not healthy, not in the least. She could point out a thousand flaws between them all, from degrading commentary to physical violence, but it wouldn't make them any less of a team.

Zabuza grunts, leaning back and tossing the picture gently onto the table, never taking his eyes off of it. He's been a bit more withdrawn and stressed since they received Haku's crow, but he's recovering well. Or, as well as he can be.

Kisame looks like he has a migraine, his jaw clenched together in a poor effort to hide it. She can tell that he has a lot of questions he can't word just right, but they are past the event horizon now. There's no turning back alone, and that is... it's...

It's more comforting than she can express.

Ryuishi leans her head against Zabuza's shoulder, lazily bumping her thigh against Kisame, who wordlessly nudges her back. It's been a long, long road, and nobody has made it out unscathed.

They are monsters, each and every one of them, but they know that. They have seen the worst in the world and in each other. From Kisame's inadvertent torture, to Zabuza's merciless possessiveness, and Ryuishi's incredible selfishness.

They aren't ignorant of what they are, of what they can do to each other, and yet here they are.

It's a choice. Maybe not a good one, but it's theirs.